

Karel Čapek
Fables and Understories
1946

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For Rosemary, who heard many of these read aloud.

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Fables

Fables

Crime and Punishment

It could not be denied: she had soiled the carpet. Now she crouches in the darkest corner with a felonious and hard expression; her eyes glimmer greenly and her tail twitches, for she knows what awaits her. All at once everything falls away which has made her into a gentle, domesticated cat; this is an evil and wild jungle creature, a beast full of fear and hatred, which follows you with burning eyes as an ancient enemy. She hisses like a serpent, when you approach her, her green little eyes scintillating with ferocious hatred, horror, rancor and villainy: pff hsss hsss, don't touch me!

Nothing doing, feline, guilt must be expiated among people; there is Law and Order, a cat that has sinned sticks to the spot of the deed and there! There! There! You've gotten yours, you rogue. Eyes downcast, the sinner frantically shrinks and recoils from the tragic torrent of punishment. Enough! And the poor creature winds like a snake from that shameful area.

But before the judge can stand up, she is already sitting in the middle of the room, a satisfied and graceful cat, as though nothing had happened at all, industriously licking a spot of ruffled fur on her back. She looks at her tormentor a little warily, but her eyes are already golden again. "Look at what a nice kitty I am; open the door for me, I want to go into the kitchen."

Whereupon she goes out, clearly giving the impression that she is in no hurry.

Megalomania

He was a little dog no bigger than a glove, with frog's eyes and on spindly little legs which he always raised up daintily, as though they might freeze. Nothing was in his old, wretched head except the name Pucinek and the knowledge that wetting the floor was a thing that was punished.

Then the heavens opened to the clatter of thunder and a heavy, roaring, soaking downpour came down in huge sheets, at that moment the sandy courtyard of the manor transformed into a yellow lake, which tore into the yard like a flash in deep rills, gouging deep tracks as it went.

At that moment the little dog tottered down the stairs; when he saw the divine inundation under him he started to tremble and bowed his skinny flanks in submission like a penitent and avowed sinner:

“Master, master, punish me: it was I who wet the floor so.”

A Matter of Honor

He was doomed by the overwhelming disadvantage; of course, a wolfhound is tougher and stronger than a shaggy miniature pinscher; he was just a pile of fur on the ground into which the wolfhound sunk his horrible fangs.

The mistress of the house dragged him out of that raging pile by his collar; he let himself be dragged, but glared back at his enemy: You coward, you cur! If they weren’t holding me back...

Now he lies on the carpet, licking his bloody wounds; and when the mistress looks at him, we wags his stump of a tail victoriously: You should see the other guy, right?

The Forsaken One

Three nights it rained, and three nights the gray striped tomcat did not come. She waited pressed against the wall until her paws were frozen; then in the day she complained in a deep and broken alto when she thought no one could hear. If you wanted to pet her, she crawled fussily under a chair: Pardonnez-moi, I don’t feel up to it today.

But the third day after a night like that she hurls herself into your arms, nuzzling passionately: Pet me, serve me, entertain me! There is my ear, my chin, my neck! More! More! I love no one on earth more than you!

And she purrs, purrs noisily and convulsively until she drools.

Horse

Music broke out on the street, the trumpets rang out, and bum! and bum! The drum rolled like a strong fellow beating the way of some great parade. Yes, it was some sort of celebration; behind the brass band was a decorated cart, on which were banners and girls and outcry, tra-la-la and cymbals; revel, O people, in this whole cartload of music, but I

looked, and I do not know why, at the horse who was pulling them all, and I was greatly surprised. I at least expected the horse to be smiling.

Quite the contrary, he was not smiling; he looked so serious and official that it made everything worse. It looked as though he were trying to show that he disagreed with this effervescent joy. He looked wistful, as though he were pulling a funeral car instead of a heap of madmen. It seemed as though he were deliberating over something.

“I am doing serious and important work.”

Lidové noviny, 19 July 1925

Philemon, or On Gardening

Cabbage

I was so proud of it; it was full, lightly frosted, and as curly-headed as a younger František Langer;¹ but suddenly out of God knows where the caterpillars of the white cabbage butterfly came; if the name were accurate, they should have gone and eaten some white cabbage over in Strašnice, leaving my Savoyards in peace; they devoured everything down to a filigree of veins.

Before that disaster I had been inclined to reorder my system of values and deem cabbage as the queen of the flowers. Well, it's not true; the queen of the flowers remains the rose, by the obvious fact that it cannot be eaten.

Presumably man too must be distasteful, if he is to become the king of all creation.

Succulents

Don't think I have a collection of them. I only have the four clay pots and some hens and chicks; but the vegetation involved suffices to astound me.

The first little cactus looks like it has a mind to grow itself a piece of raw mutton; it is red tending to violet, fat, and very comparable to a work gone terribly awry; this wonder of nature is, honestly put, a little loathsome.

The second cactus decided to adopt a shape that seems to have come out of a tinsmith's fantasy. It must be doing this intentionally; it looks like a some sort of manufactured product.

¹ His brother-in-law Karel Scheinpflug referred to Langer, long a colleague of Čapek's at *Lidové noviny*, as "Čapek's oldest friend" in his biography Můj švagr Karel Čapek (70).

The third one is made up of pretty little fat purple and green sabers with a clear eye towards stylization; the whole thing, though, is speckled with some sort of tropical rash that looks like thick, white, mildewy pustules. It seems to not be contagious, at least.

You should see the fourth monster grow. This hair comes up first, a little star comes out of that, and a green tassel sprouts under the star. Finally the whole thing turns into this horned ball thickly set with prickly stars. I cannot begin to imagine what will happen next.

The strangest of all, though, are the ordinary hens and chicks. I set the first one down and ignored it; let it show me what it could do. Well, it does something interesting; wherever the fancy strikes it--in its armpit, round the back, on its head--it throws out a green leafy head. This breaks open, rolls into the clay, sends out a rootlet and grows like crazy.

I can't even imagine what I would do if a child started to grow in my armpit or on my breast or on the back of my neck. Some hens have twenty chicks on themselves; that's an outbreak of fertility; it is motherhood completely unleashed.

Weeds

I made a discovery: each plant has not only its own leaves and flowers, but a certain kind of root as well. You who don't mess around in the soil, laying waste to weeds, have no conception of the hidden wealth of roots. There are roots that are light, fleshy, sickly pale; or fat, arborescent, rich as a shock of hair; creeping, woody, swollen, tuberous, stubborn, brittle, strong as catgut, shallow and deep, plump and starvingly scrawny, rosy as living nerves and black as dry rot, hirsute and bald; I tell you, life under the ground is just as rich as above it.

Clay

I spoke of clay, and a gardener became angry with me. Garden soil, he said, is no clay; it is earth, humus, a useful and living substance; whereas clay, we all know, is dead matter, marl, slag itself. I was ashamed of myself somewhat; the gardener was right. Why, then, did the Lord create man out of clay and not out of soil? It is not written that Adam was made out of humus. It is not said that the Creator made him out of fine leaf mold. He carefully set the humus and leaf mold aside for the Garden of Eden. We gardeners, therefore, do not fritter away the best soil on doubtful pursuits.

How to Grow Clouds

It takes a lot of work: it is necessary to weed very carefully, to toss out muck and small stones by hand, to kneel on the earth, bend over, dig about in the soil, water profusely, collect caterpillars, exterminate aphids, loosen the ground and serve the earth; when your back hurts from all this and you straighten up and look at the sky, you will have the prettiest clouds. *Probatum est.*

LN, 6 September 1925

Aesop the Gardener

Earwig

You wretched, worthless, ugly little monster, who nibbles away my tender seedlings and gobbles my scarcely-emerged sprouts, you who work your way into every corner of my house in your aimless and repulsive haste, hide under my blankets and swim in my drinking glass; you wriggling little beast, snapping at me with your pincers, I beg you--what on earth are you good for? What purpose do you serve? What contribution do you make? Is there any creature under the sun more worthless than you?

“I’m not useless, sir; I have accomplished something immeasurably useful during my lifetime.”

And what exactly have you accomplished, Mr. Earwig?

“I had lots of children.”

Cat in the Garden

You willed an orderly lawn into shape out of arid wasteland, and bushes up out of bare twigs; you raised a housecat on your lap from a stray and spitting kitten. And now your tomcat glides like a serpent through the high grass and underbrush, its golden eyes shining, joyful tremors running through its glossy coat.

“Me? I am a wild beast in the forest primeval.”

Ownership

I’ve long since held an affection for sparrows because they are poor but merry,

because they are grey as old rags, disheveled as tramps, carefree as children; chatty, satisfied with life and somehow entirely democratic; for this and other reasons I have always regarded them with affection as they eke out their little lives.

Begone, you worthless thing, beat it, you miserable sparrow, get lost, you wretched thing! Where is my cat, where is my staff, where is my gun? You mean to tell me, you little bandit, that you took *my* first cherry off *my* little tree?

A Statesmanlike Act

The begonia in the flowerpot wasn't long for this world; in spite of all efforts on its behalf it was rotting underneath and withered on top, so much so that it was terrible to see. The gardener even threw it into the darkest corner of the cellar in a fit of pique. Then he forgot about it altogether, having more important things on his mind than a ruined begonia.

When he was looking for an empty flowerpot in the cellar fourteen days later, he found the begonia resurrected, once so tall, now thirsty as hell and terribly desperate to live.

“How well our gardener understands his affairs,” the other flowers whispered.
“What worldly wisdom!”

Flowerpot

You're staring, right? Look how much I've grown since spring! Look at the foliage I've got! How I smell and bloom!

Grasshopper

Brrr! Into the earth at once! Must dig into the good, moist soil! Hey, a man picked me up! How disgustingly hot and dry he is! I can't take it, my stomach's coming up! Ughhh!

Child in the Garden

He's tearing off flower buds and sticking them in the gravel paths.
"Hey, what are you doing, you little garden-wrecker?"
"Planting flowers."

Cactus

I stab you and in spite of that you still brag what marvelous thorns I have?

Weed

I know, comrade rye: there is a conspiracy against me. When they mow the meadow it is only to wipe me out. They send the hail down on me; they try to burn me with the sun; they hire the moles and locusts to come after me. But I stand my ground. I know why they're after me. Oh, I could tell you a thing or two!

LN, 8 August 1926

Fables

I.

People

—It's a bother, my good fellow. I have to shoo away the boys in a minute so they stop bothering my dog.

—And I have to shoo away the dogs, so they don't chase my cat.

—I have to shoot cats in my garden, so they don't chase the birds.

—And I have to shoot the birds, so they don't eat all my cherries.

Aphid

Oh, neighbor of mine, is there any justice in the world? Have I held someone back?
Do I stand in someone's way? I sit here quietly under a leaf, you can't see me, you can't
hear me, I crouch in my little corner like the tiniest shade, I mind my own business, I just
lay my little eggs and move from leaf to leaf quiet as can be—I tell you, ma'am, I never
push my way to the front or get mixed up in anything, and Man, that brute, that Herod,
hates and oppresses me anyway!

Birch

They say I'm a beautiful white birch. That's something! Just wait and see how
beautiful I am when I am old!

Grasshopper

I tell you: people plow... they dig... they hoe the earth... they do this just to spite me. They know I don't like it... They do it on purpose. To bother me.

Factory Chimney

Ha, clouds! A mere party trick! Such weaklings! You should look at my smoke: how thick and dark it is! And the amount! You could cut slices! Young man, that's what I call a cloud!

Old Pine

How does one achieve my age and height? It is quite simple: you must choose dry and sandy soil, with little humus and few nutrients--what, the old beech told advised you the opposite--the richest soil possible? And the willow advised moisture underneath? Don't believe that, those are stupid ideas, heed my words: the best is bare sand that's dry, dry, dry!

Roof

I know, I know, there's nothing to me, no one looks at me. But how beautiful I am when I glisten in the rain! How I feel at that moment to be a roof!

Slipper

Unhappy me! To always be with this other one, with this nag, with this stupid old hag. Without her, I could have gotten into a much better pair...

Bee

They make up sayings about my industriousness! As far as I'm concerned, I take more pride in my sting!

Ant

So! These idiots put a house right in our way!

Kerosene Lamp

Light bulb? Oh, sure; but I've learned how to hum.²

Flower

It's not true that I am wilting. I am still growing.

LN, 6 December 1932

² Obviously before the advent of fluorescent bulbs; the kerosene lamp would now need to come up with another source of pride.

II.

An Educated Caterpillar

Haha--I'll become a butterfly? Old wives' tales, sir. Mere illusions. Fairy tales for children. It has been scientifically determined that there are only innards in us caterpillars, and no wings. No colored wings. One passes and that's the end.

Stink Bug

I, sir, can be happy with my children. They are healthy and talented, they know their way in the world, and finally, they stink. Praise God, you'll never lose one of 'em.

Phone Book

Poems! Such a thin little pamphlet. And this they also call a book? Please!

Old Relic

Oh, well, in my youth, they were different times. Back then, we ash trees grew to the sky. And the grass? Back then, the grass grew taller than I am now...Mind you, that was just the grass. But nowadays!

Dandelion Seed

I'm flying! I'm soaring! I'm ascending to the clouds! I finally know why I was put on this earth!

Head Louse

What is underneath us, far down and deep where our proboscides do not reach?
Nothing. Only stone. Nonliving and useless matter.

Beetle

There is one natural law. One morality. One wisdom: Be firm!

Snail

Ants are rabble. For example, they don't even believe in the Great Gastropod that created the earth!

Flowerpot

I'm just a piece of pottery? Me? Look at what I've grown!

Rooster

It's still not day. I haven't said so yet.

Rusty Nail

Haha, I got him right in the foot! And he still calls me useless!

Tree

Good perspective: for that one must grow tall.

Sparrow

Oh, sure, the nightingale! But there's more of us sparrows!

Stump

And why don't they say "lofty stump" too?

Excrement

If only I had wings! Then, young man, I'd make a different impression!

Fox

Everything living is divided into three parts: enemies, competition, and prey.

Crane

What cruelty? The struggle for existence, sir, is always legal.

Millipede

Well, I'd just like to know...if there are millipedes on other planets.

Bedbug

I have not lived in vain... I leave behind me an array of descendants... And all bedbugs! Bedbugs, every one!

Weed

Lofty tree, bah! Wait and see what will become of me in five hundred years!

Doormouse

There are three kinds of creatures: doormice, animals, and plants.

Flower

I smell nice? I attract insects? Ah, you see, I know nothing about this!

Toad

Progress? Naturally, there is progress. For example, I used to be a mere tadpole.

Important Fly

Haven't you heard? That's the fly who sat on the crown of a king!

LN, 19 June 1932

III.

Division of Labor

I shall watch you as you work, and you can look back upon me as I eat.

Envy

Oh, God, those hot dogs smell so good, and I only have this capon for dinner!

Employer

What's this, only eight hours of work? You think I only spend money eight hours a day?

Executioner

You know, our kind have feelings too. I would not do it gratis.

The Boss

I give the orders, so you should pay me; you pay me, so I get to give the orders.

Psychoanalysis

This dream reminded me of my dead mother. Please, does this signify incest or necrophilia?

Bedbug

Oh, I know all about people! The things I could tell you!

Cactus

Just be well-defended! Look how man recoils from me! He even ends up serving me.

Peacock

I don't wear this for show. It's on account of the females.

A Philosophical Caterpillar

Get out of here with your humans! Such relativists! Creatures that eat everything?
As far as I am concerned, I only acknowledge the leaves of the buckthorn.

Crane

That is to say, I am an individualist from principle.

Bee

Why do I have this stinger? In the name of the hive.

Fly

Bad times, these. But during the war, girls, there were the most beautiful corpses!

Earthworm in the Flowerpot

What do you know of solitude? But I, I who am both male and female...Ah, the loneliness!

Match

Look, I am an eternal flame!

Mycobacterium tuberculosis

Tuberculosis? What's that?

Caterpillar

Sex? I'm surprised it comes up so much. In my opinion it's vastly overrated. For instance, I myself have no conception of such foolishness. I'm far too rational for that.

A Digging Mole

That blue speck on the horizon? That's nothing. They call it Mont Blanc.

Snake on a Branch

Go any way the wind blows? No, but you have to go with the flow sometimes.

Weathervane

Today it's blowing from the north-north-east and that is that!

Last Leaf on the Tree

Long live life!

LN 20 November 1932

IV.

Log in the Water

Will that trout tell *me* how one is supposed to swim? That half-wit! Why, he's going against the current!

Mayfly

A hundred year-old turtle? How can something be so terribly ancient?

Grub

Winter? I survived that a long time ago.

Mouse

Hmph. Birds. Such relics! I cannot comprehend how anyone can be a bird.

Sparrow

Is the lark right? Out of the question. There is only one truth and that is the sparrow's.

Snail

For example the straight line is unsound, because it is not a spiral.

Hood Ornament

It's me who's steering the car. I'm driving.

Sedimentary Rock

We don't recognize the existence of any quartz.

Nettle

Is this garden abandoned? I wouldn't say so.

Fly

Do you see those flyspecks on the picture frame? That is my work, sir. I too am a painter.

Carp

No living thing can survive in the air.

Scrap in the Wind

Up and away! We are flying now!

The Qualified Caterpillar

Botany? That's my field.

Gravel

I've honed myself mentally to attain gravel-hood.

Ass

Fie! Such serious times--that cherry should be ashamed to bloom so!

One in an Anthill

I've already got it. The twentieth century demands collectivity.

Flea in a Dog's Fur

We've driven off the neighbor's dog Vořech, right?

Stink Bug

Just so you know, I reek in the name of all stink bugs.

Dried Leaf

The imperative of the times? We know what it is: to rustle in the wind.

Smoke

You're all slaves to matter. Only I am free. And the clouds.

Laundry on the Line

I am a banner waving proudly! Behind me! Into battle!

Droppings

Am I mineral? Am I animal? What an existential problem!

Dried Mud

Only the hard stone will stand the test of time. And I too am stone.

Rot

I too go with the times.

LN 9 April 1933

V.

Thersites

Hooray, hooray, we Greeks have won!

Ephialtes

But I got that good-for-nothing Leonidas!

Neighbor

He's a coward and a traitor, that Archimedes! An enemy descends upon our city, and *he* draws his circles!

The Statesman Cato

What's that? Hunger? Famine? Crop failure? That's nothing. First off, Carthage must be destroyed.

Ananias

Sure, he wanted to save the world, why not, but he shouldn't have gotten caught up with those Pharisees.

Nero

The persecution of Christians is a lie. We are merely refuting their conception of the world.

Attila

We too have come to save the world.

Boleslav the Cruel

...The thing with Václav, that was a political necessity.³

Genghis Khan

Burn and slash on! This concerns the grandeur of Mongoldom.

Muslims

Yes, but *we* fight in the name of God.

Dictator

I have attained unanimity. Everyone must listen.

Tyrant

You squalid lot, I made a great nation out of you!

After St. Bartholomew's Day

Oof!...We have recreated spiritual unity in the nation.

³ Had his brother Václav (St. Wenceslaus) killed to become duke of Bohemia in 935.

Father Konias̄

Education? Oh, sir, *I've* read all about it!⁴

Conquistador

You know, O benevolent God, that inhumanity is alien to me. The Aztecs, of course, are not human.

Commander

Shut your mouth, my heroes!

Blacks

We have burned the village of Twi. Our victory is a new page in the history of the world.

Over a Fallen Enemy

He started it. He couldn't defend himself, and now there is peace.

Looter of the Slain

None of this feeble humaneness! War is war.

⁴ 18th-century Jesuit monk notorious as a book-burner

Report

Inhabitants slaughtered and city burned through simple order and discipline.

Leader

We fight for an exalted idea: for its victory.

Contemporary

Is Hus correct? I'll tell you one thing: his strategy isn't.

Another Contemporary

What does that Galileo say? The earth revolves around the sun? Hmm, *I* have bigger fish to fry!

Yet Another Dictator

I have taken away their freedom, but in return I have given them self-confidence.

LN, 30 April, 1933

VI.

Enemy

(Cat): My greatest enemy is the dog.

(Dog): Mine too.

Predators' Morals

There are two kinds of creatures: enemies and competitors.

Lion School

When you go out to eat, might makes right, it is said--it's a question of lionly pride.

Ant

I'm not waging war. The anthill wages war.

Viper

Me? I only want my peace and quiet.

Painted Lady

The nerve! What that mere cabbage white gets away with!

Swift

Those stinking, miserable, worthless swallows!

Ox

I always say, what on earth are the deer good for?

Poles in the Field

Look at those stupid trees: all those branches and no order.

Stake

Quiet, poles! I am fence material.

Broken Pot in the Flowerbed

Do I really have to be with all this dirty mud? Young man, I'm too good for that.

Cornerstone

The sun? What a slacker! Always gadding about aimlessly...no firm position at all.

Stink Bug

Everyone has their opinion of the world. I think it stinks.

Brick

I know how things should look best of all. Orthogonal.

Cowpat

Plop! So, now I have unfolded my personality.

Gutter

I know I'm no great river. But what inner nature I have!

Mirror

I have it. The world is merely my reflection. There is nothing outside of me.

Clock

I don't run poorly--I run ahead. I indicate the future.

The Doomsaying Fly

The days are getting shorter. Woe is me, the world is ending!

A Sparrow and the World Situation

Not a horse dropping to be seen...What is the world coming to?

Trash Heap

Look at me grow! Look at me grow! This is the vigor of life, is it not?

Birth of a Mayfly

Look, look, I have created life!

Boulder

It's spring? Eh, it'll pass. I've seen lots of springs and none of them were any good.

Today

I too will be the hallowed past someday.

LN 24 June, 1933

VII.

Critic

Why would I examine the world as it is? It suffices for me to know how it *should* be.

Soothsayer in February

We must prepare for a time of winter.

Critical Toad

I say that the snakes really shouldn't be so disproportionately long.

Flagpole

This is the highest level of evolution: no roots, no branches, no leaves.

Civilized Rat

Enough about the villages. They don't even have sewers.

Turtle

Why don't I hop around like a frog? Out of habit.

Goat on a Leash

How small the world is!

Fly in the Window

I know where the limits of reality are.

Mirror

Man is just a reflection of me.

Broken Mug

The world is meaningless. Vanity of vanities.

Mayfly

History? What does that mean?

Spider in the Web

The waiting is such a drag too.

Tadpole in a Flood

Hooray, we tadpoles have overrun the world!

Dead Branch

I've finally done something for myself.

Mud

We're nicely drenched here, my clouds!

Generation

Room for us young people! For how long? At least fifty years!

Tree in the City

I am a leader. I am the first out of everyone to turn rusty and flake off.

Pupa

Hear me, now begins the Age of Pupae!

Leader

Everyone behind me, and I shall lead you from November into December.

Sheep

Let them kill me so long as they lead me there.

Slave

I could do something too, if only someone ordered me to.

Brown Ant

Freedom for the ants! The whole world for the ants! Of course, so long as they're not black ants.

Wolf

Peace is when no one is hunting us wolves.

Dictator

I have given my nation faith. Faith in my flag.

Hyena

Bah! We lions have no sentimentality.

LN, 5 November 1933

VIII.

Fundamental Disagreements

Driver: That guy on foot is milling around like a sheep.

Pedestrian: That beastly man drives like a maniac.

Rabbit-Keeper

I wonder how anyone could keep pigeons.

Pessimist

Spring is coming? Man, aren't you the optimist!

National Economy

Grease Manufacturer: I know why a recession has struck. Not enough people are selling grease.

Cement Vendor: Not at all. It's because cement has fallen in value.

Philanthropist

What of this poverty? I have just given a beggar a penny.

Capitalism

I don't do it for myself, but for money.

Functionary

What if someone else wanted to work in the field in which I strive so lovingly and productively!

Testament

What you cannot accomplish yourself, at least spoil it for the other guy!

Patriotism

Only our nation honors our great and heroic nation. All the others are just murderers, cowards, sell-outs and villains.

Leader

Their natural strengths will henceforth be commanded by me. I command everyone over this cliff!

Statesman

The prosperity of the state? It is either that which helps us, or that which harms another.

Speech to the Troops

Don't even say those on the other side are people. Call them enemies or criminals instead.

Demagogue

The ignorant rabble thinks I am leading them, but it is they who lead me.

Authoritarian Government

I command you to do what I want, but I command you because it is what you want.

Militarist

War is purely a matter of guts. The purpose of war is for a nation to realize its strength.

Tyrant and Philosophers

I shall do things and you will find their justifications.

Dervishes

He was sent by Allah to lead us.

The Mob

Why are we shouting his praises? Because his glory is our glory.

Slave

To obey is to have a share in the power of one's master.

A Conformist

It is such a fabulous feeling, that I am also We.

Looter of the Slain

Glory! We have won!

Civil War

Fire at will! The law is on the side of he who has cannons.

Benevolent in Victory

I was not vengeful. As I shot him, I forgave him for defending himself.

Master Executioner

And no one ever says that I am a hero.

LN, 11 March 1934

IX.

Planets

Those poor inferior planets, which revolve around other stars!

Breeze

Dandelion, you should see the damage we hurricanes wrought on Florida.

Acorn

It's just a rumor that a thousand year-old oak fell. It's as if we young oaks weren't even here!

Paper in the Whirlwind

Hooray! Let's go uproot some trees!

The Letter E

Abolishing all the other letters except E: think of the poems then!

Molecule in a Flash Flood

I go along with my own.

Weathervane

So, I've decided upon a new course.

Wave in the Current

Look at how many of them are behind me!

Dust in a Cyclone

Make way for me, trees! I'm flying now!

Wet Sheet

The great Flood? That's just the case with me.

Mouse

...For example, having antlers on one's head is obvious nonsense.

Small Tortoiseshell Butterfly

How could anyone be a large tortoiseshell?

Caterpillar

Nectar? Nectar? That I do not eat on principle.

The Aesthetic Tulip

Ick! Who was talking about mud!

Pearls Before Swine

Ew! Look what they've gone and mucked up my slop with!

Herd Mentality

Will we stick together? Not at all. We only stick with the herd.

Weed

You call that a great tree? Look, one of its branches is dead!

Bacillus

...I am just a silent laborer.

Woodworm

I made that creak!

Worm in the Grave

It's only fair that the succession now falls on me.

Excrement

Terrible conditions, these. Not a one of us can even raise a proper stink.

Broken Mug

I say the times aren't what they used to be.

Crack in the Wall

What do I want to be? A much larger crack.

Stone in the Path

Do I obstruct? That is my duty.

A Stone Has Crumbled In the Mountains

So you see. So you see. The mountains have already crumbled away!

LN, 24 June, 1934

X.

Pharaoh

The slaughter of the Israelite children? A mere administrative operation.

Persian News From Thermopylae

Yesterday the heroic Greek warrior Ephialtes joined our ranks.

Report From Herod's Chief of Staff

Our units have achieved a splendid victory over the infants of Bethlehem.

Alexander the Great

My goal has been achieved. I have made India a permanent part of Macedonia.

Among the Ruins

So, peace has now been restored.

Victorious News

We have overcome twenty thousand dead enemies and a few traitors.

Attila

I want peace too, but a Hunnish one.

Khan

Kill them! I want to proclaim myself their king.

On the Battlefield

Look, our nation has grown by negative three thousand enemies!

Conquistador

These barbarians fight our cannons with bows and arrows!

The Defeated

I escaped to spare further bloodletting.

Commander

Only use your weapons against those who are defending themselves, and of course also against those who aren't.

News

We burned several other towns during our advance. What remained of the population welcomed us heartily.

Colonial War

You dirty savages, just wait until you are our faithful and happy subjects!

Diplomacy

We abhor violence, but are willing to supply arms.

Neutral

Neutrality? That means making money off of a war waged by others.

Imperialism

Equilibrium is when we have the advantage.

Colonization

And now we shall paternally care for those who remain.

Mars

A ban on aggressive wars? As long as defensive wars and punitive campaigns remain!

War Memorial

Here lies the Unknown Packhorse.

News From the Battlefield

Our heroic gas attack has repelled hordes of cowardly fleeing citizens.

Death

You fools, this is My victory!

Peace

Now we can peacefully devote ourselves to rearmament.

Progress

We'll soon civilize these savages; they already understand thermite and mustard gas.

LN, 17 May, 1936

XI.

Citizen

Damn the government! My pipe's gone out already!

Complainier

How can I know that I've already had too much to drink again?

Baker

I say raise the price of rolls and lower the price of everything else, and this crisis will pass.

Employer

...We work together; we all, you and I, work for *my* company.

City Dweller

Scandalous! What have our poor come to, that they have nothing to eat here but beggars from another district!

The Newspapers

The truth is only that which is in the interest of our party.

Beggar

I say that all charitable foundations should be abolished.

The Sated

All this business about famine is horribly overstated. It's not so bad.

Old Memorial

I said we were hurtling towards an abyss fifty years ago!

Pensioner

I see that this world is headed for its end.

Man of Letters

How is it not enough that *I* write books?

Journalist

I have not lived in vain...just think of the hatred I've managed to summon!

Anonymous

A man has his honor. I wouldn't write this under my own name.

Reader

A whole week already and no global catastrophe! Why do I even buy the paper?

Spokesman

We protest in the name of our professional honor against everything in this world that threatens us.

In the Editor's Office

Here is news that a cure has been found for the bubonic plague. Do you know if our party is for plague or against it?

Diplomacy

Thank God the contract is settled; now we just have to think of a way to break it.

International Law

What one can not do legally can be done for reasons of prestige.

The Leader

Thanks to intensive propaganda God has decided I must lead my nation.

Diplomat

International law? That's always what the other guys are violating.

Funeral Parlor

Our nation is sinking. We have no great men any more...It's been so long since we had a really glorious funeral!

Patriot

How would he fight for his country? He has nothing!

Gangster

The first rule: be the one who shoots first.

Regent

I have given a shining example of love for one's country; I let three hundred thousand people die for it.

LN, 10 January 1937

XII.

Stink Bug

Let me stink, so long as they can tell I'm there.

Stick

If you only knew the roots I have!

Trash Heap

Here, bring everything right here! Everything on me is part of me.

Puddle

I am one of the elements too.

Nettle

God, these potatoes are growing like weeds.

Carrion

What do I want? I want everything to smell.

Truncheon

It is I who am right!

Dung Beetle

Oh, me? I'm just an organized vulture.

Goat Leader

I am announcing the Lion Paradigm.

Mud

I am the path, in case you didn't know.

Ant War

...Yes, but our side is fighting in the name of all ants.

Worm

Long live war!

The May Gazette, 1935

XIII.

Toad

Shut those damn birds up. Then I'll sing!

Gnat

Yes, but our leader is a veritable eagle.

Fallen Tree

I'm just getting my strength up. I'll stand up again.

Stump

Well, sure, I can't move, but that means I can't misstep.

Stone

The moss on me? Well, let us grow, let us grow.

Gravestone

If only people didn't walk all over you like that!

Book

I can only give the answers I contain.

Fence Post

Ah, spring... I can feel myself growing.

Basalt

Don't touch me, I am molten lava.

Undated Manuscript, 1935

XIV.

Avalanche

Hooray! We mountains have set out on the march!

Aphid Eulogy

He was an upstanding aphid. He had the greatest stench of all.

Writer

So that's the end of wars. I have just added my signature to the petition against warfare.

International Agreement

We rabbits have settled an agreement with the chickens that we will not devour each other. Now we shall see what the crane will say to that.

Whirlwind

Fifty cities destroyed! What a sensational success!

Goat

I say if we got along with the wolves there would be peace on this earth.

Fox in the Henhouse

Well, that egg provoked me so impudently!

Wolf

That ram had malicious intentions. Trying to hide himself from me.

Flock of Sheep

If we don't defend ourselves, at least the wolf will eat his fill quicker.

Mouse

Look, the cat caught a sparrow! Now we mice have nothing to fear any more.

Sparrow

You know there must be an awful lot of chirping to make a spring.

Manuscript undated

Fables From the Future

(An engineer has written that the rocks in the area of Prague should be excavated to construct underground shelters for the city's inhabitants.)

In the Age of Underground Shelters

To think that the people back then constructed their buildings above ground! What primitive times those were!

Structural Commission

Your cave is unsanitary. Air leaks into it.

Science

...It was still taught back then that the Earth's atmosphere was composed of oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, and other rare gases.

Horrible! Such ignorance!

Child

Mom, what are the 'purple mountains?'

Morality

Showing the face is indecent. No proper girl should see anyone without her gas mask on.

Mother

—What has your son done?

—The little rascal almost climbed up to the earth's surface!

Reader

—What are you laughing at?

—This old book has all these descriptions of nature.

Landlord

If you don't pay the rent in a week, I'll throw you out of this subbasement and into the sun.

Opulence

Man, this is luxury! These people have artificial stalactites in their cave!

Moving

My doctor ordered me to get a change of air. So I'm looking for a cave somewhere in the Permian Period.

Envy

Oh, him? He got his apartment in the Vinohrady tunnels out of nepotism.

Monument

—What is that shaft for?

—They're going to fill it in to create a subterranean column for our Leader.

The Ideal Apartment

—And you don't have rats here?

—Of course not! No rats could survive here.

Differences

Limestone makes the best houses. Granite is too cold and dark.

Young Woman

And we have set up a little underground garden, where I will raise mold and mushrooms in little pots.

Neighbors

It's awful. The wind is rising again.

Reminiscence

It's been exactly a year since we laid our poor father to rest on the surface.

Cavemen

—Look, I have uncovered an ancient firepit.

—Get out! You think people back then had such a high culture that they lived in caves?

In the Sewers

These stupid ancestors of ours made such narrow hallways!

Divers

Wife, hand me my diving helmet: I'm going to surface.

Boy

—Dad, what's peace?

—I don't know. Don't ask me such stupid questions.

Myth

People once lived aboveground? Those are fairy tales. Scientifically speaking, it's nonsense.

In the Year 2200

Greatest invention of recent times! The rustproof flint!

In the Year 2500

...he returned and states that he could breathe entirely well on the surface of the earth.

Let us grant that he could, but what then, sir?

LN, 20 May 1934

Fables on Civil War

Civil War

Hurrah! We shall exterminate each other in the name of the nation!

Triumph

Three hundred thousand political opponents dead? Lord, what a beautiful national triumph!

National Success

Our heroic Foreign Legion has struck at the heart of the cowardly hordes of our domestic enemies.

A Page out of History

—Our national honor was defended by foreign soldiers with foreign money.

Self-sufficiency

Don't spill your blood for foreigners! Wage war at home!

New Map

Write this over the whole map: Here lie the lowly betrayers of the nation.

Nation

The nation only consists of those who fight under our command.

Recognition

Soldiers, you have done all you could for the greatness of our country. You're halfway there.

Before Battle

Soldiers, shoot your own brothers. Our homeland is watching us.

The Conquering Hero

Let it all be ruined so long as it is mine.

Situational Report

Our victory is not yet complete. The majority of our citizens have not yet been killed.

News from the Battlefield

Our cannons have succeeded in leaving our capital city in ruins.

A Question of Law

The legal government is the one with the greater number of cannons.

A Good Shot

...succeeded in setting fire to a hospital.

Ordre du Jour

Have at them! You can always hit your own.

Military Principle

To defeat an enemy means to compel him to be dead.

Appeal to the Besieged

You fight in vain. We appeal to you to simply let us execute you instead.

The Battle Won

Our troops have achieved a splendid victory over three hundred executed men.

General

Praise be to God that no international laws can hinder us now.

Commander

The laws of human decency? That is interference into our internal affairs!

Satan

Now this is what I call war!

Death

I am entirely satisfied. Here they take no prisoners.

La Muerte

I too work for the nation.⁵

The Last Volley

With one well-aimed blow the whole universe has come down on the heads of our domestic enemies.

LN, 22 November 1936

⁵ Assumedly a reference to the then-current Spanish Civil War.

These Times

The Advance of Civilization

We shoot more efficiently, but we don't call it war any more.

No War

The proof that we actually do not wish for war: we fight without declaring it.

International Agreements

...Yes, certainly, but it is our *internal* affair as to whom we invade.

Bulletin

We deployed two new division with tanks and planes into battle. The enemy is in retreat, having suffered heavy losses. The peace holds.

Peace

We don't want war. A punitive campaign against the weak is enough.

Diplomatic Note

To demonstrate our peace-loving nature, we are willing to allow our enemy to surrender unconditionally.

Protest

We complain to the rest of the civilized world that our barbaric enemy, instead of accepting our conditions, continues to allow our pilots to kill his women and children.

Bulletin

Our air force has finished its bombardments, achieving a decisive success against the enemy forces. One soldier, seventy women, and one hundred children were killed.

Wolf and Goat

We have reached an economic arrangement: I won't eat your grass, and you will give me your own flesh to eat.

Proof

To come to an agreement with the neighboring state, we have begun to bombard their undefended cities in a show of force.

Bulletin

The enemy maliciously attempted to shoot at our airplanes, who were peacefully dropping bombs on his city.

Good Intentions

We are willing to bring our conflict before an international conference--of course on condition that we will be found to be right.

Principle

The more the wiser man retreats, the more quickly the smarter man advances.

Two Tigers in the Jungle

We met in the interest of peace, and agreed to hunt together.

Fox

Don't believe all that squawking. Once I'm done, there's always peace in the henhouse.

Gangster

Sir, if you were to defend yourself, I would be forced to consider it an unfriendly act.

Wolf

I have eaten my fill. Once again the higher morality has prevailed!

Mugger

He came after me, while I simply was defending my interest in his wallet.

The Court

Three hundred arrested? And to what do they plead guilty?

Forty-five of the Executed

According to their own free confessions, they were attempting to knock the Earth from its orbit.

Death

So you see, *this* sort of peace isn't all bad!

LN, 22 November 1937

Snippets

I.

—Why are you looking at that roof?

—I'm terrified that the roofer is going to fall, but that miserable man still hasn't!

*

Forthrightness: I never gossip about anyone; I just say what I think.

*

The locust is not an Egyptian plague; locusts are an Egyptian plague, because there are so many of them. It's the same with stupid people.

*

Nationalist: To hell with the nation; for us it's only about its prestige.

*

Economist: Today's outlook is horrible; it's because the economy's not being run by my theories.

*

To hell with the nation; for us it's only about its prestige.

*

Captain of Industry: I work to earn my living; but what robust work! and what a

robust life!

*

—I am one hundred percent convinced...

—Sir, couldn't you discount that a bit?

*

Caiaphas' thoughts: I would like to know who that Nazarene was paid by, and how much he got.

*

My cousin is a bastard, but it's an insult to our family honor if someone else says so.

*

To criticize is to convince the author that he's not doing it the way I would have done it if I had done it.

*

One of the greatest horrors of civilization: the educated fool.

*

Even the revolutionary spirit has its pedantry.

*

Wise is our speech: it makes a fundamental distinction between “I am convinced” and “I have convinced.”

*

Better to abide the official instead of his platitudes.

*

Religious fundamentalism: Who is not with me is against me. Political fundamentalism: Who is not with me is scum.

*

In the debate: What is it to me what's right if I'm not?

*

Only a few people struggle for prestige; most of them have it.

*

The age of machines: replacing purpose with speed.

*

Imagine the silence if people only said what they knew!

*

Nature created struggle, but man created hatred.

*

I'll never change again, said the stump.

LN, 12 February 1933

II.

Don't say it's hate. Call it recognition.

*

Agreements are for the weaker party to enforce.

*

Thanks to the efforts of our statesmen world uncertainty has been maintained.

*

...In the interest of peace, they struck against the defenders with all their might.

*

In the name of peace no foreign sacrifice is too great.

*

There are powers great and small. There are also powerless great and small.

*

Localizing the conflict: Leaving the victim to his fate. Liquidating the conflict:
cutting off his legs.

*

It's not so bad; if they hadn't sold us they would have given us away for nothing.

*

...We at least know what we have lost.

*

At least there is progress in the world: instead of warring aggression we have aggression without war.

*

Failure: not using opportunity. Success: abusing opportunity.

*

The old story is true: sometimes the walls can come down with a single shout. But you can't build anything with a shout.

*

What misery, arousing such sympathy!

*

No, they've really trimmed the fat from us.

*

At least there is some economy there: being betrayed by yourself.

*

Even at the pyre there is someone heating up their soup.

*

The only one who truly believes is the one whose work looks forward.

*

To build it back up again...is worth one's life.

*

Unlucky, maybe, but at least not unimportant!

*

So you see, there are those people who would give up more of themselves than simple territory.

*

The only new people are those that are equal to new challenges.

LN, 16 October 1938

Understories

The Libertine

“Please,” said Mr. Smítek, “what do you married men know about life? You sit at home in slippers, drink your half-liter of beer, and it’s good-night by ten; you’re already snoring when you pull your blanket up to your chin. That’s what you call life.”

“So you say, Mr. Smítek,” Mr. Rous interrupted, “you live like a king on your wages. But if you had to support a wife and a couple of screaming kids—”

“Go on with you,” Mr. Smítek grumbled distastefully, “on my wages! How could I live at all on my wages? It’s barely enough for pocket-money. There are places where you cannot give even the piccolo player fewer than fifty crowns. And for the band? Sirs, you can place a thousand crowns on the table and no one even bats an eye.”

“Don’t start with that again, Mr. Smítek,” said Mr. Kroll, “I’ve never heard of any thousand crowns for the musicians; that’s hogwash if you give them that much for a bit of fiddling.”

“Listen,” Mr. Smítek said, “you still don’t understand. Each musician makes like he’s just looking at the music, but all the while he’s paying attention to who you are with and what you are doing and what you are talking about, how much is in the pot, and so on. When he makes this motion with his thumb, it means: pay and I’ll be quiet. That’s the way it is, sir.”

“They are beasts,” said Mr. Kroll in wonder.

“They are. Look, Mr. Rous, today you couldn’t squeeze a crown out of me, and this evening I swear I shall spend twelve thousand. And you married men think you have all sorts of troubles when you owe a hundred and twenty to the greengrocer.”

“Twelve thousand?” said Mr. Rous, “I wouldn’t like to be in your skin, sir.”

“What of it,” Mr. Smítek yawned self-indulgently, “you can’t take it with you. Why, yesterday night—oh, what good would it do to tell you! Gentlemen, such is life—”

“But debts,” Mr. Kroll said sharply, “one shouldn’t acquire debts; you’ll fall into the hands of the usurers and that’s it for you. That’s how it goes.”

“Debts,” Mr. Smítek said without concern, “they don’t matter, as long as a man has contacts. A banker once told me that, from Amsterdam—now there were some fantastic women! My God, this one mulatto girl, you have no conception—well, this banker told me: buy Mexican currency, and you will make eighty times your money in a week. You see, a man must have contacts, and you won’t find yours at home in bed.”

“And did you buy that currency?” Mr. Rous asked with interest.

“Oh, I lost that long ago,” Mr. Smítek said evasively. “If it happened once, it can happen again. I just love the excitement, you see. And even if a night like that costs a few thousand, I’ve experienced a new slice of life.”

“But you look it,” grumbled Mr. Kroll. “Wait and see how your kidneys or liver feel in a few years.”

“What of it,” Mr. Smítek said with a sinful frivolousness. “So long as I have lived my life.”

*

That evening Mr. Smítek bought himself some pâté and a hundred grams of Edam,

then he went home and made himself tea. His cat Lízinka got a bit of the pâté and the rind of the cheese; then she washed her face with her paw and wanted to go out.

“You rogue, you frivolous thing,” Mr. Smítek petted her, “you want to go out again already? Just sit at home in peace, what are you looking for? You’re old enough to know better, you tart,” Mr. Smítek said tenderly, lifting Lízinka into his lap; then he brought the receiver to his ear and tuned the crystal to see what was on the radio tonight. Someone was reciting poems; Mr. Smítek tried to keep the beat with his foot, but got bored when he couldn’t do it well, and grabbed Lízinka’s tail. Lízinka merely turned briskly and clawed his hand; then for good measure she jumped from his lap and glared at him from under the bed.

The poems and Lízinka’s bad mood ruined Mr. Smítek’s evening somewhat; he read through the piece of newspaper he had brought the cheese home in and was in bed by ten; at ten-thirty Lízinka jumped onto the bed and snuggled onto his foot, but he was already asleep.

*

“Ah, this damned life.” Mr. Smítek yawned the next day, “Guys, what a night that was. Look,” he said, showing his hand, “at this scratch. Now there was a girl for you—a Russian, name of Lízinka—what a wildcat, and what a temper—” Mr. Smítek hopelessly waved his hand. “What good is it to tell you! You married men, what do you know about life? Ah, bring on the law or death, so long as one has known life! But you? Just leave me be with your small-town morality!”

LN, 5 February 1928

His Final Affairs

The tram, clanking and rattling, worked its way uphill towards the Olšanský cemetery.

“Look,” a short little man said to a younger man in a rabbit fur coat, “They’re building something there; it will be a school or cinema, maybe. You know, I’m really glad I got to see him one last time. ‘It’s you,’ he said. I don’t think it really helped him much, but a man must show his friendship. ‘I’ve come again,’ I told him, ‘but you’ll be running along soon,’ I say, and meanwhile—”

The young chap in the fur coat nodded his head mournfully.

“I wore the medal to make him happy,” the little man continued, “and he said, ‘My God, is it you?’ He recognized me, you see. And I told him, ‘Jozef, it will pass.’ And he says: ‘Maňička, give me some of those giblets.’ So she gave them to him, and he only took two bites, just pecking at them, but he didn’t swallow anything. ‘Maňička, give me some of those giblets,’” the man repeated, quite touched.

The young man in the rabbit-fur coat dabbed at his nose.

“Well sure,” the little man comforted him, “he was your brother, after all. She said he didn’t even know himself any more, but he looked at me like this and said: ‘Toník, is that you? Just wait and see,’ he announced, eagerly rubbing his hands together, “how many wreaths the poor man will have. I went and asked how much a wreath with a bow cost, and they said it was eighty-five crowns. Then I said no bow, I’ll just put my card on it, I wrote ‘Sweet dreams, your Toník’ on it. It’s all the same, right? A man must show his friendship, but I don’t need to spend twenty crowns on a bow to do that; besides, someone will just steal it from the cemetery.”

“They told me,” the young man in the fur coat said in a weak voice, “that one with a ribbon cost ninety crowns, and I said it costs what it costs, even if it cost a hundred crowns, so long as it’s proper.”

“For your brother, sure,” the little man said, “and for that it’s wonderful. The ribbon has golden writing on it that says ‘Last farewell, Jenda and Liduška’—well, that’s wonderful, I tell you. ‘Last farewell, Jenda and Liduška,’” he repeated, savoring every bit of its beauty. “We’re not there yet, it’s two more stops. It’ll get us there just in time for the ceremony, right? He’ll have a fine one.”

The young man weakly nodded his head.

“Don’t worry too much about her,” the little man advised him. “What else could she have done for him, the poor man; besides, she won’t be alone for long. Maybe she’ll give you that table of his, and what’s left of his clothes. And put your name in for the watch too. I wouldn’t leave her a thing, if you ask me. Oh, she has to give you the wardrobe, too—say it’s a family heirloom.”

“Aren’t we there yet?” the young man asked sorrowfully.

“One more stop,” the man said, “and then a bit further on foot to the chapel. I think Franta will be there, and the other guys. That will be nice. She doesn’t have any right to anything now that she’s dead. You’d be crazy if you left anything to her. And no need to pay the doctor; he’ll probably forget about it. If you don’t need the wardrobe, you can just sell it. But that wreath is fantastic. Take the ribbon home, it would be a shame to leave it there, you can hang it around the mirror like this, you see? And if Ladislav were to die on you, then you’d have the ribbon to use again. At least I got to see him one more time, poor man, it made him so happy—”

The tram slowed in front of the cemetery gates.

“Wait, just wait until it stops.” He held the young man back, “You could fall out, and you’ve got such nice clothes on today. It would spoil the whole funeral.”

Therewith the bereaved set out for the cemetery gates, thoughtfully supporting the young man in the fur coat by the arm.

LN, 12 February 1928

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

Parliamentary Correspondent's Report

Last night Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* was performed in front of a packed house and to unusually great interest. Prince Hamlet, with his renowned loquaciousness, certainly staked his claim as this tragedy's chatterbox, but the focus of the audience centered entirely on the anticipation of Polonius' appearances, he being as celebrated a statesman of Denmark as that wordy pontificator. In truth, his dialogue added extraordinary significance to the play and was given an unusually appreciative ear. A brief synopsis of the whole play follows.

After the initial paranormal formalities, the Danish king was the first to speak; after him Hamlet added some typically impractical yammering, and then Polonius stepped up and delivered, to an attentive silence, a speech dazzling in its keen insight and sharp perspective. We excerpt from its end:

“Yet here, Laertes? Aboard, aboard, for shame!
Even private time to you, and you yourself
Have of your audience been most free and bounteous.
Do you believe his tenders, as you call them?
I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth
Have you so slander any moment leisure
As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet.
Look to't, I charge you. Come your ways.”⁶

Following this, Prince Hamlet attempted to undermine Polonius' powerful words with his own inane and confused bleatings; neither he nor his companions were at all

successful. Even the ghost of his father, played up for shock value, certainly did not confuse the discerning audience. After these distasteful scenes Polonius once again began to speak, delivering in conversation with Reynaldo some remarkable insights on the civil education of young men.

“Give him this money and these notes, Reynaldo.
You shall do marvell’s wisely, good Reynaldo,
Before you visit him, to make inquire
Of his behaviour.
But, sir, such wanton, wild, and usual slips
As are companions noted and most known
To youth and liberty.
Gambling, ay, or drinking, fencing, swearing, quarrelling,
Drabbing.⁷ You may go so far.
So, by my former lecture and advice,
Shall you my son. You have me, have you not?”

Turning to Ophelia, he continued.

“How now, Ophelia? What’s the matter?
With what, i’ th’ name of God?
Mad for thy love?
What said he?
Come, go with me. I will go seek the King.
This is the very ecstasy of love.
Come, go we to the King.”

⁶ Polonius’ lines excerpted from <http://opensourceshakespeare.org>

⁷ i.e, whoring.

Polonius added a sharp observation to the following conversation, which even occurred in the presence the king and queen.

Th' ambassadors from Norway, my good lord,
Are joyfully return'd."

After that, the evening proceeded to its climactic moment, when Polonius firmly exposed Prince Hamlet's strange behavior. He spoke to an eager audience in a manly and pitiless way, fully aware of his responsibilities.

"I will be brief. Your noble son is mad.
Mad call I it; for, to define true madness,
What is't but to be nothing else but mad?
That he is mad, 'tis true: 'tis true 'tis pity;
And pity 'tis 'tis true. A foolish figure!
But farewell it, for I will use no art.
Mad let us grant him then. And now remains
That we find out the cause of this effect-
Or rather say, the cause of this defect,
For this effect defective comes by cause.
Perpend.
I have a daughter
Who in her duty and obedience, mark,
Hath given me this. Now gather, and surmise."

To breathless anticipation he read Prince Hamlet's highly compromising letter and continued.

"What might you think? No, I went round to work
And my young mistress thus I did bespeak:

‘Lord Hamlet is a prince, out of thy star.
This must not be.’ And then I prescripts gave her,
That she should lock herself from his resort,
Admit no messengers, receive no tokens.
Which done, she took the fruits of my advice,
And he, repulsed, a short tale to make,
Fell into a sadness, thence into a weakness,
Thence to a lightness, and, by this declension,
Into the madness wherein now he raves,
And all we mourn for.
Hath there been such a time- I would fain know that-
That I have positively said ‘Tis so,’
When it prov’d otherwise.”

Amidst much excitement, the play proceeded to a sharp argument between Hamlet and Polonius, in which he demolished his bumbling opponent with these sharp and decisive words:

“How does my good Lord Hamlet?
Do you know me, my lord?
Not I, my lord.
Honest, my lord?
That’s very true, my lord.
I have, my lord.
What do you read, my lord?
What is the matter, my lord?
Fare you well, my lord.
You go to seek the Lord Hamlet. There he is.”

Hamlet, after his deserving defeat by these withering and well-aimed words,

embarrassedly babbled something to the audience's complete disinterest; he tried to divert the conversation to some actor in his well-known and impractical way (by making a confused hodgepodge of things), but Polonius, returning in a timely manner from offstage, landed a few more verbal blows.

"My lord, I have news to tell you.
The actors are come hither, my lord.
Upon my honour—
This is too long.
My lord, I will use them according to their desert.
Come, sirs."

It is no surprise that Hamlet was only capable of delivering a monologue after these memorable words; he clearly feared such a quick-witted opponent.

After intermission, Polonius, understanding the value of behind-the-scenes observation, added this weighty piece of advice to the play:

"Ophelia, walk you here.- Gracious, so please you,
We will bestow ourselves."

Private conversation between prince Hamlet and Ophelia followed, after which Polonius concisely said:

"How now, Ophelia?
You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said.
We heard it all."

Meanwhile, prince Hamlet arranged a theatrical production—of course, in quite an unseemly way; during this embarrassing episode Polonius rightly pointed out:

“O, ho! do you mark that?”

Another vehement argument arose between Hamlet and Polonius concerning the former’s unfortunate enterprise. Blow after blow of Polonius’ sharp words fell upon the prince:

My lord, the Queen would speak with you, and presently.
By th’ mass, and ‘tis like a camel indeed.
It is back’d like a weasel.
Very like a whale.
I will say so.”

The shamefaced Hamlet could only console himself by monologue after such a moral thrashing, as was his dubious and cowardly wont.

Further along in the play Polonius delivered another piece of valuable and circumspect advice:

“My lord, he’s going to his mother’s closet.
Behind the arras I’ll convey myself
To hear the process. I’ll warrant she’ll tax him home;
And, as you said, and wisely was it said,
‘Tis meet that some more audience than a mother,
Since nature makes them partial, should o’erhear
The speech, of vantage. Fare you well, my liege.
I’ll call upon you ere you go to bed
And tell you what I know.”

He then said fittingly to the queen:

“He will come straight. I’ll silence me even here.
Pray you be round with him.”

Hamlet maliciously impaled him; at this, Polonius added with his characteristic quickness and forthrightness:

“Oh! I am slain!”

The play should have ended with the death of Polonius; what follows is simply idle chatter without rhyme or reason; Prince Hamlet is an especial burden on the audience with his unsuitable and overly personal monologues as to whether he should be or not. A good half of the play could simply be deleted. The evening would have been wasted were it not for Polonius’ fantastic speeches.

We have described the play Hamlet in as much detail as possible, so the appreciative reader can create his own impression of the entire play. The audience, while attending the powerful words of Polonius with the utmost attention, was clearly disinterested in the end of the play. An insignificant group of unquestioning partisans applauded Hamlet’s empty words and demagoguery. Of course the discerning public will not be deceived by such an obviously hollow success.

LN 18 January, 1931

The Inventor

I tell you, sir: there is a certain method to invention. You cannot rely upon good fortune or inspiration; you'd never get anywhere that way. You first must know exactly what it is that you want to invent. Most inventors invent something, and only then think about what it's good for, and lastly they give it a name. I've turned this technique on its head, sir: as for me, I invent the name first of all, and then I design a suitable thing for that name; in this manner I have arrived at a completely new source of technical inspiration. From words to things: that is my method.

Wait a moment, what if I gave you more specific examples? People have work rooms, for example, waiting rooms, rooms for lodging, display rooms and places like that. We have waiting rooms, but modern man has no time for waiting: his motto is quickness, speed, tempo. I say, why not therefore create a hurrying room? A well-furnished hurrying room would of course have a whole array of quickeners and celeritators, thrusters, automatizers, clankers and noisemakers; I already have patents filed for various gnashers, crepitators, interruptors and falterers—new inventions and devices, sir, that no one else has thought of yet. That's it in its entirety: new words must be invented to get at new things and new solutions.

Or take this: we already have chutes and even drop testers: but it hasn't yet occurred to anyone to create a faller--a thing which would constantly fall in all circumstances. Why is it that only vases, statues, and other domestic articles can fall on you? But a faller! It falls, guaranteed! Try it and you'll like it! I'll also throw in these slicers and choppers in various settings, and alarms in all size, luxuriously appointed. Are your buttons sometimes loose on your shirt? Buy our patented debuttoner now! It will loosen things for the whole family.

Parents, buy the Stainoamatic for your children! Save them work in soiling their clothes! Stainomatic with a whole box of Stain Sticks, only thirty crowns. Our modern

overcooker belongs in every modern kitchen. Do you have our tie-tier, our lace-lacer or our wrinkle-wrinkler yet? We recommend our fully automatic Procrastinator for all companies and offices. No modern home can lack our highly efficient Fragmentizer and the reliable, precise Nap-Mate! Take naps at every opportunity!

Do you ever make mistakes? Certainly you do, for to err is human. But why should you have to take the time to make mistakes? Our patented, trademarked errorizer will make mistakes for you! Our new model FV 1303 makes up to 699 mistakes a day! — Are you preparing for a trip? Don't forget to pack a pocket Wander-Pal! Cheap, reliable, practical. — Do you do nothing? If so, buy our "Nothing Doing" machine! Quiet operation, low operating cost. Patented in all countries. — Give your loved ones their new favorite toy for Christmas, the Dull-Max! A fantastic source of boredom! — Do you already have our Mangler? Indispensable for schools, offices, large firms and even households. — The most sensational invention of our time: the standing wheel! A wheel which refuses to turn! New! We recommend it for all factories crippled by strikes! — No more losses! Our new, inexpensive Vanisher takes care of your greatest problems, or try our nickel-plated Disappearer! For a greater volume, we recommend our mechanical Lose-Max or the highly efficient, self-regulating Auto-Loser, reliably losing even the largest items. — Buy our universal distractor! It will distract you guaranteed, at home or abroad, at work or in your spare time. — Do you stammer? Buy our Stammer-Be-Gone in powder or pill form. You will stammer without worry. Doctor recommended. Thousands of satisfied customers. — You are nervous. Your nerves are fatigued by the same racket which is the curse of our age. Order one of our new silencers! The silencer is a machine which never makes a single sound. The newest silencer in a beautiful mahogany case, electrically wired, only 1,795 crowns. The last word in radio technology!

Yes sir, that is how it is done. Find a new word, and then it is rather easy to engineer a reality to suit it. That's what I call scientific progress, sir. I bid you good day, sir, for I have no more time: right now I'm working on a universal destroyer. Sales will be brisk in that, wouldn't you say?

LN, 15 March 1936

Miracle On The Playing Field

It happened in a friendly match between the Žižkov High football team and the fourth form of the Prague XI gymnasium. In spite of the heroic goalkeeping of Ferda Zapotocký, the Žižkov High team was losing two to nothing at the end of the second half, and their side was reeling under sharp attacks. An unstoppable shot had just been taken by the fourth-form student Zdeňek Poppr, known as Kád'a⁸, when something strange happened: the ball stopped in the air, rotating at an unusual speed, and after a moment's pause flew back like a meteor into the netting of his own goal. There were four minutes left in the second half. No one had gotten a decent look as to how it had happened, and play continued; the fantastic Zdeňek Poppr again took control of the ball, overcame the defense and launched a low shot towards the Žižkov goal from close range. Thirty spectators, on hand to root for their renowned school, had already burst into cheers; but the ball was nowhere to be seen. All the players started to look for it, until the fourth-form goalie from Prague XI himself found the lost ball, resting peacefully in his own goal. Just then, the end of the match was whistled. The fourth-form team protested against the irregular goal, but there was nothing to be done: the final score was two to two.

From that day the Žižkov High team proceeded from victory to victory. They thumped Libeň High three to nothing, destroyed the fifth form of the Holešovice normal school four to one; they defeated the sixth form of the Kolín gymnasium two to one on their own field (with two wounded on each side), and, by defeating the reform gymnasium of Prague XIX, the youth team for FC Slavia, the Košíře high school, and the German Realschule of Prague II, they earned the right to play the defending collegiate all-stars. It was an unprecedeted success in the history of the world.

But no one on the winning team even realized that there had been a quiet spectator

⁸ "Curly."

at all of Žižkov High's triumphant victories, a first-form student at Žižkov, Bohumil Smutný. No one even spoke to him, for he was a virtuous and religious sort. No one noticed him at school or on the field of play. Only the previously mentioned Zdeňek Poppr (who followed the enemy eleven to all of their matches out of jealousy and hatred) noticed this devout and humble spectator; moreover, he noticed that Bohumil Smutný would drop down behind the nearest barrier or bush at critical moments and ardently pray, whispering: "Oh Lord, have mercy! Grant that our side score a goal!" And at that moment the ball would stop in mid-air and rush backwards towards the wrong side, or suddenly disappear, to be discovered in the opponents' goal, or it would trundle down the field on its own while the enemy team stumbled and fell, as though an invisible force were hindering their feet. And Zdeňek Poppr, known as Kád'a, told his older brother about this, Záviš Poppr, a student at Masaryk University and member of the All-Star team.

The day before the historical match between Žižkov High and the college all-star team a young man waited for Bohumil Smutný outside of school. He introduced himself as Záviš Poppr, medical student and sportsman, and told him: "I know you are a huge sports fan, Mr. Smutný; our Zdeňek told me that you really like coming to the games. But I think you might not understand the rules enough; my boy, you have have the rules under control if you want to get anything out of the game! Fortunately I have some spare time, and so I said to myself, why not tell you a little something about football, so you know how it's supposed to be played."

That day Záviš Poppr walked around the streets of Žižkov for three hours with Bohumil Smutný, telling him all about corner kicks, the goal box, offside, handballs, offense and defense, extra time, a fair match, an irregular match, penalty kicks, diving saves, unsportsmanlike conduct, strategy and so on. Bohumil Smutný could only nod his head and say: "Yes. Yes, I understand. Yes, I already know that." And he even thanked him politely, for he was a polite and virtuous boy, and not the sort of rascal that some of today's boys are.

The next day the match took place between Žižkov High and the collegiate All-Stars. At the start of the second half the All-Stars already led six to nothing. Bohumil Smutný sat among the spectators, sweating in terror, hands clasped together, praying: “Oh Lord, have mercy, and do something....by the rules...let our team score a regulation goal...perform a miracle, but a fair one!”

At the end of the second half, the All-Stars led eleven to nothing, and Záviš Poppr turned and whispered to his brother: “So you see? There can be no miracles while the rules apply.”

LN, 22 March 1936

Legal Case

—So I'm on the eighteen, the windy part, and I think I've got a clear road ahead (of course that's bull), so let off the gas just a bit and roar into this sharp turn. And suddenly I see there's this procession going across the way. A funeral. It's just started over the roadway towards the cemetery gates. I slam on the brakes, and man, what a skid! I remember the four men carrying the coffin dropping it and diving for the shoulder, and bam! My car hits the rear end of the coffin and it flies through the gravel on the shoulder and into the field.

I get out of the car and say to myself, Jesus Christ, if I hit the pastor and the other mourners, that'll be it! But nothing had happened; the attendant stood with a cross on one side of the highway and the pastor and the mourners on the other side; I tell you, they looked like wax statues. Then the pastor started to shake and angrily sputters: "Sir, sir, have you no respect even for the dead?" And I was just glad that I hadn't killed any of the living! Then the rest of them all got a hold themselves; some of them started to curse me out and others ran to help the dead man in the broken coffin; I suppose it was some sort of instinctual response. And suddenly they all ran back and started roaring at me in anger. And then I swear a living man climbs on his knees out of that pile of boards, fumbling about on his hands and looking for a place to sit down. "What on..." he says, still trying to sit down.

I was at his feet, as the cobbler said. "Grandfather," I say, "they were about to bury you!" And I help him out of the boards. He's just staring and stammering: "What? What? What?" He couldn't stand up though; I think he had a broken ankle or something because of the collision. To make a long story short, I put the old man and the pastor into my car and headed for the house of sorrow, and behind us went the mourners and the attendant with his cross. And the band, of course, but they weren't playing, because they didn't know if they were getting paid. "I'll pay for the coffin," I said, "and the doctor too, but other than that you should be thanking me that you didn't bury him alive." And I went off

and I was glad, to tell you the truth, that it was all behind me and that nothing worse had happened.

I thought it was behind me, but it was only just beginning. First off the mayor of this old man's town wrote me a nice letter, saying that the family of the man supposed to be dead, one Antonín Bartoš, retired railwayman, were poor; that they had wanted to bury their grandfather respectably with the very last of their savings, and now that thanks to my reckless driving he had been awakened from the dead they would have to bury him a second time, which their impecunious circumstances did not permit. If I would be so kind, therefore, to pay for the ruined funeral and the pastor, the band, grave-digger and wake as well.

Then came a letter from a lawyer in the name of this old man: that Mr. Bartoš, Antonín, retired railwayman, sought recompense for his ruined shroud; a few hundred more to set a broken ankle, and five thousand for the pain and suffering that my actions had caused him. It already seemed like lunacy to me.

Then a new letter: that the old man had drawn a pension as a railwayman; they stopped his pension, of course, when he breathed his last, and now the bureau didn't want to start paying him again, because they had a death certificate from the regional coroner. And it said that the old man was suing me to pay his rent for the rest of his life as compensation for the lost pension.

Another demand came: that the old man had been ailing since I resurrected him and had to be given more nourishing food. I had supposedly been the one who crippled him; that he had risen from the dead didn't matter any more and didn't make a lick of difference. All he would say was: "I was already done for, and now I have to die again! That doesn't come free, he must repay me for it or I'll take the case all the way to the courts on high. To wound a poor man like this! There should be corporal punishment for that, maybe even the death sentence." And so on.

The worst thing of all is that my car hadn't been insured and insurance is obligatory. So I don't know. Do you think I'll have to pay?

LN, 5 April 1936

Devil

The third performance of the first reprise of Dvořák 's *The Devil and Kate* was about to begin. The theater lights had been dimmed and the murmurs of the audience ceased as though they had been switched off. The conductor tapped and raised his baton. Mrs. Malá in the first row closed her bag of bonbons, and Mrs. Grossmanová sighed: "I do so love this prelude." Mr. Kolman shut his eyes in the seventh row, ready to fully enjoy "his Dvořák , " as he was wont to say. And the lissom overture began to course over the orchestra.

The curtain shimmered on the right side and a little creature slipped onto the stage; it gave a start at seeing the dark abyss of the auditorium before it, and looked about in alarm to see where it could hide. But then it caught hold of the lively polka rhythm of the prelude, and the little creature began to tap its feet to the beat.

It could not have been larger than an eight year-old child, but it had a hairy chest and was overgrown from the waist down with thick, lustrous black fur, and it had little horns poking through its curly hair, a little goatish face, pointed; and it clip-clopped with firm, cloven hooves on little goats' legs. The audience stirred with a quiet laughter. The creature on the stage startled and hesitated a bit; it clearly wanted to retreat but was blocked by the curtain; it looked around in distress, but suddenly its hoof began to tap to the beat of its own accord. The little creature seemed to overcome its stage fright at once; it opened its mouth joyfully, extending a long red tongue, and gave itself completely to its dance; it jumped about, squatted low to the ground and drummed its hooves in clear delight. It even started to dance with its hands, fluttering them overhead, fingers wiggling happily; its short, fat tail raised up behind, swinging to the beat like a metronome. It was no great feat of dancing; in truth, it was only hops, skips and steps, but the creature displayed such excruciating joy of life and movement; it was so natural and charming, like a young goat bounding or a puppy chasing its tail.

The audience laughed cheerfully and murmured joyfully. The conductor was disquieted, sensing the wave of excitement behind him, and waved his baton even more energetically than before; he stared fixedly at the musicians, wondering about the strange drumming and tapping he heard, but his eyes met those of the drummer, faithful and attentive, who was still awaiting his moment to begin. The orchestra played strongly, conscientiously; no one took their eyes from their parts and no one looked at the stage. Tum-ta da ta-ta-tum. "Lord, something isn't right today," thought the conductor, and led the orchestra into *forte* with sweeping gestures. "Why are those people at the back laughing? Perhaps something has happened on stage." And to distract attention, the conductor led the orchestra through the prelude more vehemently, more quickly—

The little creature on the stage was having a grand time; it stamped, swung its feet, shook, jumped about, tossed its head and twitched its tail ever faster. Tum-ta-da tum-tum ta-ta. Mrs. Malá beamed, cheerfully grinning, hands clasped over her stomach. She had already seen *The Devil and Kate* once before, fourteen years earlier, and they had not done this. "I don't like modern direction," she thought, "but I like this." She wanted to share this thought with Mrs. Grossmanová, but the latter was enraptured, staring at the ramp and nodding her head. Mrs. Grossmanová had a sense of rhythm too.

Mr. Kolman scowled in the seventh row. "This was not done, this did not belong here. What are these directors fussing about with Dvořák, it's all been done already," he protested to himself. "And the prelude has never been played so quickly. This is a dishonor to Dvořák," Mr. Kolman thought angrily. "I shall write to the newspapers about it, he decided. I shall call it 'Hands off our Dvořák!' or something similar."

And suddenly the prelude was over. The conductor sighed and wiped his dripping forehead with a handkerchief. (What is it with the audience today?) The curtain twitched and began to rise. The lively figure on the platform took fright, looked about and disappeared under the stage with frightening suddenness just before the curtain lifted. Mrs. Malá started to clap in the first row, but Mr. Kolman hissed sharply from the seventh; as a result of which the attendees snapped to attention, and scattered and

embarrassed applause drifted in. The conductor twitched nervously, displaying a clear satisfaction in the way he held his shoulders. "Maybe I shouldn't have applauded when they were raising the curtain," thought Mrs. Malá, and whispered to Mrs. Grossmanová, "That was nice, wasn't it?"

"Delightful," sighed Mrs. Grossmanová, and Mrs. Malá, relieved, opened her sack of bonbons once again. 'Maybe no one even noticed I applauded,' she thought.

Even Mr. Kolman calmed down. Nothing else interrupted a worthy performance of the opera. "I shall write to the newspapers posthaste about this nuisance," he told himself, but then he forgot all about it.

"That was a strange audience today," grumbled the conductor, when it was all over. "I'd like to know what they were laughing at."

"You know, it's Sunday, and Sunday audiences are always the worst," quoth the first violin.

And that was that.

LN, 26 April 1936

Pâté

“What should I buy today,” Mr. Michl pondered carefully; “maybe sausage again...sausage leads to gout, though. What about cheese and bananas? The truth is I had cheese yesterday; such limited nutrition isn’t good either. And cheese, you can feel that in your stomach until the morning. God, it’s so stupid that a man has to eat.”

“The gentleman is ready to order?” the shopkeeper suddenly said from behind the counter, as he wrapped red slices of ham into paper. Mr. Michl gave a start and gulped. He really had to order something. “Give me some...pâté,” he managed, spittle flying from his lips. Pâté, yes, that was it. “Pâté,” he repeated decisively.

“Pâté, of course,” the shopkeeper chirped. “Will that be Prague-style, with truffles, liver, fois gras, Strassburger...”

“Strassburger,” decided Mr. Michl.

“Pickles?”

“Y-yes, pickles,” Mr. Michl agreed. “And a roll.” He looked about the shop furtively, as if he were looking to order something else.

“And what else, please?” The shopkeeper waited. Mr. Michl shook his head, as though to say: No thank you, you have nothing else that I need, kindly do not exert yourself further. “Nothing,” he said. “How much will it be?”

He was startled at the price the shopkeeper quoted him over the little red tin. “Lord, that’s expensive,” he thought on the way home; “it may actually be from Strassburg. My word, I’ve never eaten it before; but what a load of money they wanted for it! Well,

nothing to be done; sometimes a man feels like pâté. And besides, I don't have to eat it all at once," Mr. Michl consoled himself. "I'll leave some for tomorrow; pâté is heavy on the stomach, after all."

"Wait and see, Eman," Mr. Michl called out as he opened the door of his house, "what I have brought home for dinner." Eman the cat waved his tail and meowed. "Aha," Mr. Michl said. "You'd like some pâté too, you rascal, eh? No sir, it's no good. Pâté is expensive food, my friend, and I've never even had it myself. Strassburger pâté, my son, and that is only for gourmands; I'll let you have a sniff so you won't reproach me." Mr. Michl got a plate out and opened the tin of pâté with some difficulty, whereupon he took out his evening newspaper and seated himself for dinner, feeling quite ceremonial. Eman the cat jumped up onto the table, as was his custom, tucked his tail carefully underneath himself and flexed his front claws into the tablecloth in delightful anticipation.

"I'll give you a sniff," Mr. Michl repeated, taking a bit of the pâté onto a fork, "so you know how it smells. There you go." Eman pricked up his whiskers and carefully, mistrustfully sniffed at the pâté. Mr. Michl stared. "What, you don't like it? Such expensive pâté, you fool?" The cat grimaced and sniffed again at the pâté, nose upturned.

"Mr. Michl grew slightly nervous and smelled the pâté himself. "But it smells good, Eman! Just have a sniff! Fantastic odor, my man." Eman shuffled his paws on the tablecloth. "Do you want a bit?" Mr. Michl asked. The cat twitched its tail nervously and gave a hoarse meow.

"What? What is it?" sputtered Mr. Michl. "Are you trying to tell me that the pâté is no good?" He sniffed at it carefully himself, but sensed nothing. The devil only knew, maybe the cat had a better nose. Sometimes tinned pâté had botulin, as it was called. A horrible poison, sir. It didn't stink or have a foul taste, but it could still poison a man. God be praised that he hadn't yet put any of the pâté in his mouth. Maybe the cat sensed that there was something wrong with it by smell or by instinct. Better not to eat it, but since it was so expensive—

“Look, Eman,” said Mr. Michl. “I’ll give you a taste. It’s the finest and most expensive pâté there is, real Strassburger; so you can eat something nice for a change.” He took the cat’s dish out of the corner and put a bit of the pâté on it. “C’mon, Eman!”

Eman jumped off the table heavily and proceeded slowly to his dish, waving his tail. He sat on his haunches and warily sniffed at the pâté. “He won’t eat it,” Mr. Michl thought in horror. “It’s gone bad.”

Eman the cat swished his tail and began to nibble at the pâté slowly and gravely, as though he detested it. “So you see,” Mr. Michl sighed, “that there’s nothing wrong with it!”

The cat finished the pâté and began to clean his whiskers and head with one paw. Mr. Michl looked at him curiously. So you see, he has not poisoned himself, nothing is wrong with him. “Well, how about it,” he said patronizingly, “it was good, right? There you go, you rascal!” Sufficiently calmed, he sat down at the table. Of course, such an expensive pâté, it couldn’t be bad. He sniffed at it, narrowing his eyes like an epicure. Fantastic aroma. But maybe botulism doesn’t appear right away, it suddenly occurred to him. Eman could be seized by convulsions at any moment—

Mr. Michl pushed his plate away and went to look at B in the dictionary, botulism or allantiasis...it appears from twenty-four to thirty-six hours later (Christ!)...with the following symptoms: paralysis of the ocular muscles, difficulties in vision, dry throat, flushed mucus membranes, a striking lack of saliva (Mr. Michl swallowed involuntarily) hoarseness in the throat, lack of urine production and constipation; in severe cases, paralysis, convulsions, and death (thank you very much!). Mr. Michl lost his appetite somehow; he put the pâté away in the cupboard and slowly nibbled at the roll and the pickles. Poor Eman, he told himself, a dumb little animal eats spolied pâté and dies like a dog. Heart full of sorrow, he lifted the cat and placed him on his lap. Eman began to purr heartily, narrowing his eyes in bliss; and and Mr. Michl sat motionless and petted him,

worried and sad, staring at his unread newspaper.

That night he brought Eman to bed with him. “He might not be here tomorrow, so he might as well be comfortable now.” And he did not sleep the whole night, sitting up at times to reach out for the cat. No, nothing was wrong with him. And his nose was still cold. Eman the cat began to purr noisily every time.

“So you see,” Mr. Michl said in the morning, “the pâté was good, was it not? Just so you know, I’ll be eating it myself tonight. Don’t think that I’m going to feed you pâté your whole life.” Eman the cat opened his mouth with a tender and throaty meow. “You,” Mr. Michl said sharply, “are you hoarse? Show me your eyes!” The cat looked at him with motionless golden eyes. Hopefully that’s not paralysis of the ocular muscles, Mr. Michl startled. “Hoarseness and dry throat—what fortune that I didn’t put any of that pâté to my lips. And it smelled so nice!”

When Mr. Michl returned home in the evening, Eman the cat purred and curled about his legs for a long while. “You,” said Mr. Michl, “do you feel badly? Show me your eyes!” Eman waved his tail and showed his gold and black eyes. “You’re not through it yet,” Mr. Michl pronounced, “Sometimes it doesn’t start for thirty-six hours, did you know? So are you constipated?” Eman again twined about his legs and meowed sweetly and heartily. Mr. Michl put the pâté and his evening newspaper on the table. Eman jumped onto the table and stepped closer, digging his claws into the tablecloth.

Mr. Michl sniffed at the pâté; it smelled good, but the devil only knew—it seemed slightly different than the day before. “Smell it, Eman,” he said, “is the pâté good?” The cat placed his stubby nose near to the pâté and sniffed it suspiciously. Mr. Michl took fright. Maybe I should throw the pâté out, he said to himself. The cat knows there is something wrong with it. No, I will not eat it. Do I want to poison myself? I’ll throw it out, and that is that.

Mr. Michl leaned out the window to pick a spot to throw the tin. There, in the

neighbor's yard, where the acacia stood. "Shame about the pâté," Mr. Michl thought, it was so expensive...real Strassburger. I've never eaten it. Maybe it isn't spoiled, but...I'm not going to eat it, but since I spent so much money on it...I wanted to try it once. At least once in my life. Strassburger pâté, good sir, that's world-class cuisine. God, it's a shame, what a shame," Mr. Michl told himself remorsefully. "To just throw it away for nothing..."

Mr. Michl turned. Eman the cat sat on the table and purred. My only friend, thought Mr. Michl, touched. By my soul, I'd hate to lose him. But it would be a shame to throw out the pâté, it cost a sinful amount of money. Real Strassburger, sir: it is written right on it, have a look.

Eman the cat meowed tenderly.

Mr. Michl scooped up the red tin and placed it silently on the ground. "Do with it what you will, you little beast. Eat it or leave it, but it would be a shame to throw it away. I've never had it myself. But what about me, I can go without such delicacies; give me a piece of bread and I want nothing more. What would I need to eat such expensive pâté for? But to throw it away would be a sin. It cost a horrible amount of money, my friend. It's not to be thrown out."

Eman the cat jumped down from the table and went to sniff at the pâté. He scrutinized it for a long time and then consumed it grudgingly .

"So you see," Mr. Michl grumbled. "No cat in the world has it as good as you. Someone is fortunate. You know, I don't even have such good fortune."

And he got up five times that night to reach for Eman. The cat purred until it drooled.

From then on Mr. Michl would sometimes turn on his cat angrily. "Beast," he would say reproachfully, "you ate all my pâté!"

LN, 3 May 1936

Let's Get Organized

Mr. Lederer ambled through the park, preoccupied by his worries, and there he met the man. There was nothing unusual about him, except that he was feeding sparrows: there was a whole swarm of them around him; it was a wonder they were not climbing into his pockets. Well then, he told himself, there are still good people on this earth. And then the man looked up in fright and quickly departed.

A while later Mr. Lederer found him sitting on a bench, and since he didn't have anything to do other than worry, he sat down on the bench next to him. The man regarded him with mistrustful eyes and shifted away a bit,

“So, you like sparrows,” Mr. Lederer said after a while.

“I don’t,” said the man gloomily.

“No?”

“No. And,” the man cried out in exasperation, “I can’t even stand birds at all. So.”

“I only wondered because you were feeding them,” Mr. Lederer ventured.

“I wasn’t feeding them. That...I was just throwing crumbs out of my pockets. You understand, I don’t feed birds as a rule. Let them feed themselves, the beasts! What do I care about them?”

“So,” Mr. Lederer grumbled in disappointment, not knowing what to say next.

Meanwhile the man was scuffing his feet in the sand quietly. “So you’re a member

of the Sparrow Feeding Society, then?" he suddenly sputtered.

"I am not," Mr. Lederer parried.

"So then you're from the Songbird Preservation Society!"

"Nor that."

"Sir, what society are you from?"

"From none," Mr. Lederer said. "That is...well, I'm in one burial society. The Israelite Burial Society."

"Aha," said the man suspiciously. "But I don't want to be buried. Besides, I'm Catholic, just so you know. And I don't feed birds. And I don't even have a dachshund."

"I have a griffon at home," Mr. Lederer admitted. "A little hairball."

"Then you have to become a member of the Hairy Dog Breeding Society," the man said decidedly.

"Why?"

"Well. They come for you and there you are. Once I got a canary and three days later I became a member of the Upper New Town Harz Canary Breeding Society. Supposedly we canary breeders needed to get organized, and there we were. It's done. I had a dachshund six years ago; I gave him away just after I got him, but I'm still a member of the Purebred Hunting Dog Breeding Society. Every year they send you a check and membership card. What is a man supposed to do," the man grumbled melancholically. I am in nineteen societies."

That's a lot," Mr. Lederer warranted.

It is. One of my friends is in twenty-three, but he is interested in peace and philosophy. Forgive me for thinking you were in some sort of bird aid society. Once I gave a penny to a blind man on the street, for example, and in half a year I became a member of seven charitable societies."

"We recognize your charitable soul, join us," and so on. But the worst is when you have noble intentions. There are a horrible number of societies with noble intentions. And if you're from somewhere, then you already have native societies and regional societies and the Western Bohemia Society and what have you. I have it all written down somewhere which societies I'm in," said the man, looking through his pockets. "I don't know, there has to be a limit. You know, so a man doesn't have to be in all these societies. There should be some protection against this, or a law. For example, that no one can be forced to be in more than twenty societies."

"That's difficult," Mr. Lederer said. "It might not be possible to arrange such a law; our country has its defenders of freedom, as they are called."

"Fine freedom this is," the man spoke bitterly. "You cannot do anything without there being some society for it. I say we should get organized somehow. We should get everyone together who has had enough of these societies, and make it so that this societal pressure is reduced. Twenty societies ought to be enough, right? I think we should be organized..."

"How?"

"We'd have to hammer out a new society for it," the man spoke, immersed in thought. "I think a lot of people would join. We would just have to get organized... Create

some sort of active society or league for it...and create offices for it, to battle for our members burdened with excessive responsibilities of membership. Just found a proper society for it, sir!"

LN 10 May, 1936

The Moving Company

“—It’s true I still don’t know the technical details, but technical details can always be found if the idea is good and guarantees a return. And *my* idea, sir, will bring in fantastic profit, so long as someone helps me sort out some of the practical considerations to get it up and running perfectly. But it already sells itself, as I have said.

How do I show you clearly—Look: what if you don’t like the street you’re living on; maybe the nearby chocolate factory stinks, or it’s too crowded and you cannot sleep, or there is scandal everywhere; in short, you say it’s not for you. What do you do in that case? You pick out an apartment on another street, call a moving van and move into a new apartment, right? Entirely simple. Every good idea is fundamentally very simple, sir.

And now say that you or someone else doesn’t like this century. There are people like that who like peace and quiet; there are people whose stomachs turn when they read about war in the newspapers, or see that someone is being executed somewhere or that a couple of hundred or a couple thousand people slaughtered each other. There are limits, sir, and some people cannot bear it. There are people who do not like how the world grinds on violently each day, and they think “how have I come to this, to see this, I who am a civilized and moderate man, a family man, I have children, and I don’t want them to grow up in such a wild and dis— how do I put this, a disrupted and dangerous world, do I?” Sir, there are many such people, and when you get right down to it people today have no certainties: not even life or their positions or money, and not even their families; what is the use, there used to be more certainties in the world. In short there are many people who do not want to live in these times; and some of them are so sick of it and unhappy to live in such bad and mean times they would rather not even go out in it. What hope is there, there is nothing to do, but they want to escape their lives.

And here is where I come in, sir, and place a company brochure into his hand. *Are you unhappy with the 20th century?* Then come to me! I will move you into whatever

past age in our moving vans, specially designed for this purpose! No mere excursions, but complete relocation! Pick the century that would suit your life best, and I will escort you there with our capable staff *quickly, cheaply and safely*—even the whole family and all of your furnishings! My machines can move you anywhere in a range of three hundred years, but we are preparing machines whose operating radius will easily approach two or three millennia. For each year traveled there will be a freight charge of so much per kilogram and so many crowns per person—

How much it will cost I don't know yet: I don't yet have the machines which can travel backwards in time; but no worries, they will come, you can just put pencil to paper and add up the money to be made on it. I have the whole organization thought out except these stupid vehicles. For example, say a man comes up to me and says that he would like to move out of this damned century of ours; that he's had it up to here, I'm telling you, up to here with these gas attacks, arms races, Bolshevism, fascism and all of this "progress." I'd let him curse himself out, and then I show him: "Come make a selection, sir; here is a prospectus for each of the various centuries. Like this one: nineteenth century. An educated time, mild oppression, properly conducted wars of a smaller extent; the well-known flowering of sciences, great opportunities for economic expansion; we especially recommend the so-called Bach era for its profound peace and humane treatment of one's fellow man. Or the eighteenth century, especially suitable for those interested in religious merit; we recommend it for Enlightened thinkers and intellectuals. Or here, please have a look at the sixth century after Christ; it is true that the Huns were in power then, but it was possible to hide in the depths of the forest; an idyllic life, the smell of fresh air, with fishing and other sports. Other than the so-called persecution of Christians, it is quite a civilized era, cozy catacombs, lots of religious and other freedoms, no concentration camps and so on. In short, it would be a marvel if such a 20th-century man didn't choose some other age where life was freer and more humane. People might even say: I would gladly move to the Old Stone Age for a discount. But I would say: I am sorry, our prices are firm; please have a look at the order form for prehistoric transfer; we take our esteemed clients there in groups and can only accommodate twelve pounds of baggage per person; otherwise we cannot keep up with demand. The first open space we

have is in a transport leave for the Old Stone Age on the thirteenth of next March; if you would like, we can reserve you a seat—

What do you say, sir: it will be a fantastic business; I would probably start with thirty moving vans and six buses for mass transit. My company lacks nothing but the time-traveling machines, and someone will invent them presently; they will be essential for our refined world someday soon!"

LN 25 October, 1936

The First Guest

“Sure, they call it high society, but I tell you, it still isn’t very well organized. A man can borrow a coat and tails or a smoking jacket, he can hire a sommelier or piano players, even women good enough to eat, as they say, in little aprons as well; you can set up a full dinner for your guests, right down to the last basket of rolls, every little thing taken care of. This is all done in the name of a higher social life, but there are still always gaps—rather striking gaps, if I may say.

So say you’re invited for tea somewhere, to a reception or something like that. You ring the doorbell in the best of moods, and in the foyer you suddenly notice that there aren’t any coats or hats hanging up. A horrible feeling, sir. You would rather run away or say that you have forgotten his handkerchief at home and will be right back, but that won’t do. You marvel aloud, so it doesn’t seem like you’ve been thinking about it already: “So I am the first?” And the girl in the white apron curtsies and giggles, “Yes, sir.” And you’re already in, you have already fallen into the hands of the hosts, and you mumble in embarrassment that perhaps you have come early, that your watch is running ahead or something. Meanwhile they assure you a bit too hurriedly that everything is fine and that *someone must be first*. Of course, it is the truth, but that doesn’t mean that you had to be that someone, am I not right? Nothing to be done; the first guest always seems a bit stupid and clumsy to himself: as if he had taken the invitation to be too great an honor, as if he had crept in unannounced or something: it is simply an undignified situation, and the moments crawl by as though preordained before the second guest comes—after which the others, miserable creatures, pour in all at once. And so you shuffle before the hosts, not knowing what to say, (because they are distracted by waiting) and you would rather be God-knows-where else. In short, you are somehow wilted for the day, and cannot in any way reclaim your disrupted self-confidence.

And now imagine how many of these teas, dinner parties and social events there are in a season, and at each one there is some unlucky sort, who, through no fault of his own,

must play the sad part of the first guest. You cannot even count the number of people who are struck down by this every season. And then it occurred to me that someone has to put a stop to this. For example, I would arrange a rental agency for professional first guests. All you would have to do is call in advance, and I would send my man to the right place a quarter of an hour before it started, so he could be the first guest there; for that it would cost twenty crowns and food. It is understood that he would have the proper clothes, education, and even technical training. For twenty crowns it could be a student or an old, quiet and mild retiree; an athlete would cost more, of course, let's say fifty crowns; a distinguished foreigner or Russian prince would cost maybe sixty. My professional first guest would be in place sooner than any other first guest could be; he would stay with the hosts until another guest had arrived, at which point he would eat an open-faced sandwich and disappear discreetly. I tell you, anyone at all could make their fortune doing this; he would meet the best people, and you know, when people know someone from society—in short, the thing has a social angle too, sir; it might be arranged without any large investment...just a small office and a telephone..."

LN, 15 November 1936

Proposal

Esteemed Minister of Finances:

Two years ago I was discharged with my pension after thirty-five years of faithful and conscientious service as executor of finances. I accumulated great amounts of experience during those years, and can say that I am better in my field than the majority of financial professionals. I have gained, with this experience, the understanding that almost everyone that I have met does not like paying their taxes. They do it unwillingly, even with evident distaste, which they display quite clearly not only to the financial offices, but also among themselves (e.g. in private conversation, in the pub, in discussions with clients and the like). I have often heard the sentiment reflected aloud, in the sense that “a man pays everything he has and does not know what for”; or “there goes our money,” but never “there isn’t enough money to repair our highways”, and so on. So I conclude that one of the reasons the normal taxpayer does not like paying taxes is because he cannot imagine how our glorious treasury is using his hard-earned coin; he doesn’t have the proof that it is being used for the common good and towards goals that he himself would agree with.

Based on my experience and after much consideration, I have arrived at the idea that this state of affairs would not be difficult to confront. I envision that every taxpayer should receive a statement directly with their tax receipt as to what their taxes will be used for. For example: “Part of your taxes will pay for the wages of Josef Vrabec, schoolteacher in your city, for the months of September, October, and November.” “Your collected taxes will be used to repair seven meters of the 451st kilometer of the national highway.” “This portion will be paid as a pension to Mr. Adolf Kopecký, postmaster general, (ret.) who lives here or here.” “Your taxes will be used to buy searchlights for this or that antiaircraft battalion.” And so on.

The rewards from this new method of assessment would be as follows:

1. The taxpayer would know what his taxes were for, which would calm him and put a stop to his habitual grudge against paying his taxes cheerfully.
2. It would awake in him a lively interest in the commonwealth, especially in the areas in which his money was to be spent.

Concretely stated, in the cases that I have outlined above, a normal taxpayer would go visit Mr. Josef Vrabec, teacher at the local high school, to see if he were fulfilling his duties: if his hallways were swept, if he came in on time, if he were living above his means—to see if he were conducting himself as would be expected of a schoolteacher, responsible for our youth. The next would go see how things were on the 451st kilometer of the national highway, making sure no crime was being committed there and ensuring that everything on his stretch of highway was in perfect order. The next would visit Mr. Adolf Kopecký, postmaster general (ret.), to see if the old man was lacking anything, to make sure he wasn't going to the pub too early and so on; he might even ask him to lunch on Sundays to establish some sort of personal connection. The next would gain a greater interest in searchlights and military matters in general, which he would consider to be his own personal duty. "Well, our army," he might say, "now they have some searchlights! I pay for them, so I know."

I hope the honorable minister can judge how this simple little solution could increase the taxpayer's faith in how his withholdings were being used: he could himself oversee the correct usage of his monies; and so too would his interest increase in common welfare, especially if his monies were used for a different purpose each year. Such a taxpayer would already know in advance what his money would be used for that year, and how to check up on it, to make sure if was being used for proper business, and how to follow up, if need be, on the various improprieties of the schoolteacher Josef Vrabec or the highway worker who has not left kilometer 451 as clean as can be. Many people might even accept higher withholdings of their wages than they previously had to support a functionary of a higher rank: it could be a sort of matter of ambition to attain a

monk-like level of renunciation. Many a young clerk would be invited into the homes of his contributors and might even meet their daughters; this would create tight bonds between the offices and the taxpayers and would be to the gain of both parties. One can even imagine that even the humblest taxpayer would be proud when he understood that his pittance would be used to clean a bank. Or what a pleasant surprise it would be for the administration of the municipal brewery in Plzeň when they were informed that the taxes levied on their brewery would be added to the national prizes for poetry and literature! It cannot even be imagined how this would enliven taxpaying; instead of a hated duty, it would become an adventure, which would perpetually renew the individual taxpayer's interest and become an inexhaustible source of various delights.

It is therefore hoped that the illustrious treasury will take into consideration this meager suggestion from its humble and loyal servant, John Doe.⁹

LN 21 February, 1937

⁹ The text has “N. N” for a name, which stands for *nomen nescio/nominandum [name unknown/ to be named]*, still used in some formal contexts in Germany today.

The Association of Baron Biháry's Creditors

So one of our members has passed on again—old Pollitzer (may he know God's eternal glory); you know, the one who sold typewriters. True, he was over eighty years old, but he could have lived longer yet; poor fellow, he so liked our little Tuesday meetings. If we had known that he would be leaving us so soon, we would have invited him to be our chairman. It's not that he was one of the larger creditors,—he only had a few thousand loaned to the baron—but it would have given the old man such joy.

What sort of association? It is like this: a man lived in Prague, one Baron Biháry, a tall and noble man, hair jet-black and eyes like—well, the women went crazy for him. He had a leased villa in Bubeneč, two cars, and as for lovers, according to our accounts there were seven, (such vainglory), but he was chivalrous, this baron. He had an estate in Slovakia, a forest preserve somewhere near Jasina, a pulp mill, glassworks, and oil rig somewhere near Antalovec; fantastic property, in short. You have no conception how many tractors, machines, office equipment, checks, typewriters, valuables and flowers it all required. It is true property involves a lot of overhead, but the baron liked to show off, he liked to do everything on a grand scale—you couldn't take your eyes off of him. Then it came out that there was no pulp mill, no oil, no forest preserve and no estate; just the glassworks, but the baron had sold everything in it long ago. Then it came out that Baron Biháry was no baron at all, but a Chaim Roth from somewhere near Perečín. They were going to bring him up on charges, for fraud and the like, but when a few of the creditors met they realized that they wouldn't get much out of him by prosecuting. It stood to reason no one would take out the few carpets and perfume from the villa. We creditors figured if the baron were locked up we'd lose everything, but maybe the poor bastard will come up with some money; he still was a rascal, with a fine face. We thought maybe he'd marry rich for us or something—at least in that case he would be able to pay us something back. We couldn't bring him down then or we would never see our money again. So all the investigations were called off and we created the creditors' association. There were about a hundred and seventy of us. We were kind of like the Rotary Club,

someone from every profession. Car dealers, headwaiters, bankers, tailors, jewelers, florists, an architect, a horseman, a perfumer, a couturier, a few lawyers, a prostitute and the rest, altogether we had loaned him about sixteen or seventeen million. So we met and talked about how to save the baron from going under. We had to keep his head above water so he could try his luck here and there, cautiously, of course, so he wouldn't get up to anything that could ruin the whole deal. Once we let him out of our sight for a day, and he committed some fraud and we had to straighten things out quietly . Yes, sir, they were exciting times. The baron was addicted to cards, and always cheating and cheating. Or the time he wanted to be a spy, because there was supposed to be wonderful money in it. One of us always had to be looking after him—but that's overstating matters. The baron was a terribly kind companion, he would always treat us fantastically and then tell us: "You pay and add it to my account." What could we do? We had never lived so well as we did with the Baron. And we got accustomed to it, too, and understood each other deeply—we were just elderly, discreet, experienced people who only wanted to live to see some of the money we had sunk into the Baron.

And then the baron disappeared on us. They say he fled to America, to Hollywood or somewhere like that. Well, him, he won't lose his way. It's possible he'll make a lot of money once again—and who knows, he might come back to us in a few years. You know, we creditors, we're really used to that, we miss the baron terribly, but we would miss it more if we stopped meeting every week. We always had such lively discussions about economic affairs, you know, the vicissitudes and vexations of life, and the lack of reliable things in business any more, like the way there used to be; we also swapped war stories from our various fields. Where else could one of our members hear about how it is in cars or flowers—but among us, in our association, we had every field under one roof, so to speak. And finally we said to hell with our baron. At least we met each other, and we can continue on ourselves. Period. So we keep meeting every Tuesday these last ten years; we always remember our baron, how he's wandering around America, poor man, but then we talk about how terrible the times are. It really cheers a man up, and we can have a really decent conversation about our various ailments. Twelve of us have even gone to our maker already. We will deeply miss old Mr. Pollitzer. It's a shame you never

met Baron Biháry; he was such a charming man, and if you had you could have joined our association.

Kmen Almanac, Spring 1937

Tonda

The thing with Tonda was like this. Once our aunt came over, my wife's sister, to ask for my advice. I think it was on account of that horse. She wanted to buy this horse for the farm, and so she says: "Brother-in-law, you know as many people as a stationmaster, even horse traders who go to market, so what if you looked for some handy horse for me." I tell her about the farm, and this and that, and I see aunt has a bag full of something. That'll be a goose, I reckon. Frantík, you're going to be having goose for Sunday dinner, I think. We finish up talking, but all I can think of is the goose, I could get eight pounds for it, I'm thinking, and even some lard for baking--wise woman, your aunt. And then she says I came here and brought you something for your help, brother-in-law. And she pulls it out of the bag. It starts squealing and I jump back like a scaredycat. A live piglet, I swear, screaming like it's under the knife. A very nice little pig, I must say. Well, our aunt is a simple person; like a conductor, but a country woman sees the authority there. A conductor opens his mouth and gets people to go here and there, shouting until he's red in the face, well, with his authority. So our poor aunt thought she had to show her authority somehow, to show me that I should do it and that she loved our children as though they were her own--I tell you, she brought us that pig. "Here you are, brother-in-law, here's a piglet from us."

You know, when it started to scream, the wife and kids ran over at once—such joy. The boy grabbed it by its tail and couldn't get over how curly it was. Andula took it into her lap and held it like a baby; the pig calmed down, started to grunt happily, and fell asleep, and that girl sat there like a statue, pig wrapped in her apron, and her eyes were suddenly so wide and blessed--I can't understand how a little nipper like that can be so maternal. So I say no problem, kids, we'll just have to clean out the shed and make a little sty for Toníček. I don't know why I called that pig Toníček, but the name stuck as long as he was with us. Only we started to call him Toník when he was over ten kilos, and then he later that became Tonda. Our Tonda. You wouldn't believe how quickly such a little oinker can grow. When he's seventy kilos, I reckoned, we'll have the sticking; some to

eat, some to render for lard, and the rest will cure nicely for the winter. So we fed him and tended him the whole summer, looking forward to the slaughter, and Tonda, he followed us right up to the table and let himself be scratched, I swear he did everything but talk. No one can tell me that a pig is a stupid animal.

And so around Christmas I say: "Wife, I should call the butcher soon."

"Why?" she says.

"Well, to stick Tonda."

My wife looked at me in shock, and I felt that it sounded somewhat strange too. "To kill the pig," I said at once.

"Tonda?" she says, staring at me, shocked.

"We raised him for that, right?" I shoot right back.

"Then we shouldn't have given him a Christian name," she snapped. "I couldn't bring him to my lips. Imagine, Tonda blood sausage. Or eating Tonda's ears. You can't expect that from me. Or the children either. It would seem like cannibalism to people, forgive me."

You know it, man: women are stupid. I told her that too, don't ask me how: but when I thought about it myself, I started to feel odd too. Christ, kill Tonda, quarter Tonda and cure Tonda, that doesn't sound good; I wouldn't want to eat him myself. A man can't be so inhuman, right? If he hasn't got a name, he's a pig like any other, but suddenly you have a new relationship to him once he's Tonda. What can I tell you: I sold Tonda to the butcher, and I still feel like a slave trader. The money didn't even do me any good.

So I get to thinking, people can only kill one another if the other guy doesn't have a name. If they knew the man they were pointing a rifle at was František Novák or Franz Huber or Tonda or Vasily, I think something in their soul would cry out: Don't shoot, that's František Novák! If everyone in the world could address each other with their own first names, I think a lot would change between them. But people and nations today cannot get at the names. That's the tragedy.

LN, 11 April 1927

On Travel

*

He: Listen, this year we should go to New Zealand for our vacation.

She: Why?

He: Well, because... Haven't you ever read The Children of Captain Grant? You know it's been my dream to go to New Zealand since I was a boy.

She: Fine, dear. We will go to New Zealand. You don't even know how much I'm looking forward to it.

*

He: (studying ocean liners, maps of New Zealand, etc.) Hm. Hm. That's an awful connection! And here there aren't even any roads, as far as I can tell. You have to go by boat. Hm. But maybe there would be a connection...

She: Listen...are you listening?

He: What?

She: Couldn't we go to Iceland this year?

He: Why?

She: *Everyone's* going to Iceland this year.

He: That's why *we're* going to New Zealand.

She: But I wanted to go to Iceland *so much!* It must be great there!

He: And you only tell me this now when we already have plans for New Zealand?

She: Fine, dear, we'll go to New Zealand like you want. And we won't speak about it further, right?

*

He: (studying ocean liners, maps of Iceland, books about Iceland, the Icelandic

sagas etc.) Hmm. Hmm. Christ, this is a bad connection! You have to go by horse. And here, as far as I can tell, there aren't even footpaths over the mountains. That's stupid. Hm. How would one get there? Maybe on a fishing boat?

She: Listen, couldn't we go to Holland?

He: Why?

She: They say there's great swimming in Katwijk. Emča was telling me yesterday that her family went there—And it's supposed to be really cheap there.

He: But you wanted to go to Iceland!

She: Me? It never occurred to me! There's no swimming there.

*

He: (studying maps of Holland, hotel brochures, etc.). Hm. But it's expensive there! What if we were to take a side trip to the colonies, since we'd already be in Holland, maybe Surinam or Java! Hey!

She: What?

He: Since we'd already be in Holland, would you want to have a look at Java?

She: Is there swimming there?

He: Yes, fantastic swimming. Beautiful white sailboats too.

She: Excellent, then, we'll go to Java! I just got a new white dress with a red belt—you have no idea how much I'm looking forward to Java!

*

She: We're going to Java this year.

Friend: Why?

She: For the swimming. There is supposed to be great swimming there.

Friend: Who told you that?

She: Everybody. The water is great there.

Friend: It is, but it's full of sharks. I wouldn't go there. Java's as safe as lava.¹⁰

She: Where would you go to swim?

Friend: I'll tell you: if you want to swim, go to the Alps, to Mortarlasee. Lago di Mortarla, you know? I went swimming there once—such bliss!

She: And can you get to Holland from there, to Katwijk?

He: Of course you can.

*

She: Listen (etc.).

He: (studying maps of the Alps, alpine horticulture, hotel brochures, mountain climbing, etc.)

(After vacation.)

Friend: So where did you go this year?

She: To Dubrovnik!

He: There was great swimming there.

Friend: And while you were in Dubrovnik, did you go see Progor? No? You didn't see a thing, then. And you didn't go out to Vis either? If you ask me, you wasted a trip! I could have told you where to go!

*

She: You see? I told you! We should have gone to Iceland. Everyone was going to Dubrovnik, that was no trip at all—

LN, 6 June 1937

¹⁰ The original has “Java je otrava,” or “Java is [literally, poison] a bore.”

When The Diplomats Sit In Judgment

Chairman of the Tribunal: Gentlemen, today we are unfortunately forced to concern ourselves with a very serious case. I have tried to put off these proceedings, but the force of common outrage has instigated this tribunal... (leafs through papers) The charges maintain that a robbery and murder were committed in plain daylight. A peaceful pedestrian was attacked in front of several witnesses... In addition, the witnesses' statements agree in their particulars...

...

Chairman of the Tribunal: You are the victim's widow?

Widow: Yes.

Chairman: The court would like to express its deep sympathies to you. You were present as a witness to...the unfortunate incident? Can you tell me how it happened?

Widow: Yes. (Pointing) That murderer did it!

Man With a Wart on His Nose: I protest against this public insult!

Chairman: I remind the witness that she may not point at anyone. So you maintain that an unidentified bystander committed the murder?

Man With a Wart on His Nose: (reaching for his hat) Gentlemen, I will not sit here any longer if I hear the word murder once again. It was simply a legal act of self-defense.

Chairman: I recognize your definition. So your husband, madam, was walking peacefully down the street--

Man With a Wart on His Nose: Pardon me, that is incorrect. He was not walking peacefully. He had just arrogantly deposited some money at the bank--and he seemed threatening.

Chairman: Threatening? In what way?

Man With a Wart on His Nose: He gave the impression that he was not afraid. It seemed like he was even armed.

Widow: It's not true! He wasn't armed!

Chairman: That was a great carelessness, my dear woman. If he had been armed, he could have saved us from this indelicate conversation. This...unfortunate incident (sighs resignedly) could have been avoided. Next witness, please. Sir, you were present at—

Witness: Yes. I was there when the deceased was attacked by a man with a wart on his nose...

Man With a Wart on His Nose: And who was this man? Could you name him?

Witness: No. I'd rather not.

Man With a Wart on His Nose: Right. I wouldn't advise anyone to.

Chairman: It would be better if the witnesses did not identify anyone too directly. This would ensure the court's faithful and just verdict. Next witness, please.

...

Chairman: Gentlemen, with the testimony of all the witnesses it has been

documented, that a certain person...not further named...with the goal of transferring to his possession a wallet...discharged a firearm on the street, which as a result ended a human life. In light of the fact...that we have expressed our condolences to an increasing number of such incidents in the recent past, the high court has arrived at the following verdict. In the name of human rights! Without reference to anyone in particular, we would like to proclaim...that in future incidents of this sort we would be forced to again express our condolences...and again, without naming anyone, to describe such incidents as regrettable and contradictory to the common good. That is all.

Man with a Wart on his Nose: This verdict is inimical, of course, and quite threatening. I protest on principle against all verdicts that would decide what is regrettable and what is not "in the name of human rights." In the future I shall not come, gentlemen. I do not have time for this.

Chairman: We are very sorry about this, sir. We would not willingly lose your participation in the maintenance of human rights and order. The court assures you of its particular esteem...

...

Associate Judge: It seems to me, as your colleague, that it might be better if we did not strain ourselves with cases as serious as robbery and murder.

LN 17 November, 1937

Gloria

Mr. Knotek awoke in his bachelor apartment at six forty-five. "I could lay here another quarter of an hour," he thought in satisfaction, and then a thought from the previous day submerged. It was terrifying: he had nearly thrown himself into the Vltava! He had been about to write a letter to chief clerk Polický that was not suitable for framing. "No, Mr. Polický, to my dying day I will be upset with how you could so injure a man." Mr. Knotek had been sitting at his table long into the night over a blank sheet of paper, paralyzed with indignation and shame at what had happened to him in the bank. "We've never had an idiot like you here," Mr. Polický had shouted. "You Knot-head, I'll see you transferred somewhere else, but God only knows what they'll do with you, you are the least capable employee of the last thousand years," and the like. This had been in front of the other clerks and secretaries. Mr. Knotek had stood red-faced and defeated all the while Mr. Polický raved and tossed the unfortunate statement of accounts at his feet; he had been so overwhelmed he could not even defend himself. "Just so you know, Mr. Polický," (he could have said) "I didn't prepare that statement, Šembera did; go wag your jaw at Šembera, Mr. Polický, and leave me in peace; I've been at this bank for seventeen years, Mr. Polický, and I've never made a mistake as big as that." But before Mr. Knotek could say anything, Mr. Polický had slammed his door and an uncomfortable silence spread throughout the office. His colleague Šembera had leaned over his papers so he didn't have to look him in the eyes, and then Mr. Knotek, his spirit crushed, had taken his hat and left the office. "I won't ever be back here," he thought woodenly. "This is the end." He wandered the streets all afternoon, he forgot to eat, and slunk home without dinner, like a thief, to write his final letter; then it would be over, but Mr. Polický would have a human's life on his hands as long as he lived.

Mr. Knotek stared thoughtfully at the desk he had been sitting at the night before. What had he been going to write? He couldn't remember, try as he might, a single of those lofty and bitter words with which he had intended to burden Mr. Polický's soul. He was so woeful and cold at the table that he suddenly burst into tears of self-pity; then he

felt so weak from hunger and sorrow that he crawled into bed had slept like the dead. "I should write the letter now," Mr. Knotek thought in bed, but he was so warm and snug. "I'll just wait a while," he thought, "and then I'll write it; a thing like this must be carefully considered."

Mr. Knotek pulled the covers up to his chin. "What do I write? First off I should say it was Šembera who prepared the statement. But that won't do—" Mr. Knotek recoiled from that thought. "Šembera is a fool, but he has three children and a wife who gets sick; it has scarcely been six weeks since he got a job at the bank--such an employee would go right out the door! 'There is nothing to be done, Šembera,' Mr. Polický would say, 'but we can't have people like you in our bank.' "But I should at least write that it wasn't me who prepared the account," Mr. Knotek thought, "but then Polický might investigate who it was who had, and Šembera would still lose his job. Then I'd have the poor man on my conscience," Mr. Knotek thought pityingly. "I've got to spare Šembera from it somehow. I'll just write Mr. Polický that he has done me wrong and will have me on his conscience—"

Mr. Knotek sat up in bed. "Someone should watch out for that Šembera. I should say: 'Look, you're my co-worker, it has to be done this way, I'd rather help you—' But the thing is I won't be there any more and that louse Šembera will lose his job as soon as it comes out. That's a stupid situation," Mr. Knotek thought, clasping himself around the knees, "I really should stay on—And forgive Mr. Polický for being so cruel to me? — Yes, forgive Mr. Polický for being so cruel to me. And why not? He may be a hothead but he doesn't actually think that, and in a while he won't even remember why he got upset." Mr. Knotek found, to his surprise, that he didn't really feel that injured; he felt level-headed, almost pleasant. "I'll forgive Mr. Polický," he whispered to himself, "and I'll show that Šembera how it's supposed to be done."

Quarter to eight. Mr. Knotek jumped out of bed and dashed to the sink. There wasn't time to shave any more, just to throw some clothes on and run. Mr. Knotek ran down the stairs, unusually light and full of vim, probably because he had everything all

straightened out for himself. He ran, his hat in his hand, so joyful he almost burst into song. Now he just had to get his coffee in the coffee shop, grab a glance at the newspapers, and he would go to the bank, as if nothing had—

Mr. Knotek reached for his head. Why were people staring so? Maybe there was something on his hat. No, his hat was in his hand. A taxi was going down the street; suddenly, the driver started staring at Mr. Knotek to such an extent that it was a marvel he didn't drive up on the sidewalk. Mr. Knotek shook his head somewhat reproachfully, to indicate that he did not need a taxi. It seemed as though people were stopping and staring after him, so he fumbled about to see if all his buttons were fastened and if he had his tie on. No, praise God, everything was in order, and Mr. Knotek entered his coffeeshop with a clear mind.

The busboy gaped at him.

“Coffee and a paper,” Mr. Knotek ordered, and made himself comfortable at his table. The waiter brought him coffee and stared in surprise over the top of Mr. Knotek’s bald head. Several heads popped out of the doors to the kitchen, looking at Mr. Knotek in surprise.

Mr. Knotek grew uneasy. “What is it?”

The waiter coughed in embarrassment. “Sir, there may be something on your head.”

Mr. Knotek again reached for his head: nothing. It was dry and smooth like always. “What’s on my head?” he sputtered.

“It looks like a glow,” the waiter gulped in hesitation. “I can still see it—”

Mr. Knotek frowned: clearly they were making fun of his baldness. “Mind your own business,” he said sharply and started his coffee. To be sure, he discreetly looked around and found his reflection in the mirror; he caught sight of his bald head and, around it, something like a golden ring. Mr. Knotek stood up suddenly and went closer to the mirror. The golden ring went with him. Mr. Knotek reached up with both hands, but he could not grasp it, his hands went right through the luminous ring—it was entirely intangible, leaving a weak, fine glow on his fingers.

“Where did the gentleman get this?” the witness asked with a compassionate interest.

“I don’t know,” Mr. Knotek said helplessly, and suddenly took fright. He couldn’t go to the bank like this! What would Mr. Polický say! “Mr. Knotek,” he would say, “leave those things at home; we cannot suffer such things at the bank.” “What can I do?” Mr. Knotek thought in horror. “I can’t take it off and I can’t hide it under my hat; if I could just get home—” “Please,” he said quickly, “do you have an umbrella here? I’d like to hide it under an umbrella.”

A man running through the streets under an open umbrella on a sunny day is certainly somewhat striking, but not as conspicuous as a man walking down the street with a halo around his head. Mr. Knotek made it home without any incident, until he met the neighbor’s maid on the stairs, who greeted him, shrieked in fright and dropped her shopping bag; his nimbus shone especially bright on the darkened stairs. Mr. Knotek locked himself in his apartment and ran to the mirror. Yes, it was around his head, slightly larger than a cymbal, about forty candlepower in brightness; not even water from the tap could extinguish it. No movement could disrupt it in any way. “How do I explain this one at the bank?” Mr. Knotek wondered hopelessly, “I have to call in, I can’t go in like this.” So he ran to the landlady and shouted through a crack in the door: “Please call the bank and tell them I cannot come in today. I am very sick.” Fortunately no one saw him in the hallway. He locked himself in again at home and tried to eat something, but every few minutes, he got up and went to the mirror. The golden ring about his head

shone serenely and clearly.

He started to feel very hungry in the afternoon, but he could not go to the pub for lunch in his state. He couldn't even concentrate enough to read; he sat motionless, telling himself: "This is the end. I'll never be able to go out among people again. I might as well drown myself."

Someone rang.

"Who is it?" Mr. Knotek sputtered.

"Doctor Vaňášek. The bank sent me. Would you let me in?"

Mr. Knotek sighed in great relief. Perhaps the doctor could help him, and Dr. Vaňášek was such a wise old practitioner—

"So what do we have?" The old doctor came within the doorway. "What hurts?"

"Have a look at what has happened to me," sighed Mr. Knotek.

"Where?"

"Here, around my head."

"My. Oh my," the doctor blinked, and started to examine it. "I must be crazy," he grumbled. "Where did you get this golden article, sir?"

"What is it?" Mr. Knotek asked anxiously.

"It looks like a halo," the old doctor said, as seriously as if he had said "halitosis."

“I’ve never seen such a thing in my life, my good man. Wait a moment while I examine your patellar reflex— Hmm, and your pupils react normally. And your parents were healthy, my friend? Yes? No religious ecstasies, or anything like that? Nothing?” Dr. Vaňášek straightened his glasses studiously. “Listen, this is an unusual case. I’d like to send you to a neurologist, so that they can study this scientifically. They write about electric currents in the brain these days—the devil only knows, perhaps it’s some sort of electric radiation. The smell of ozone is strong here. My good sir, this will be quite the scientific triumph!”

“Please, anything but that,” Mr. Knotek managed gloomily. “They might not like it at the bank if they saw me written up in the newspapers. Please, doctor, couldn’t you help me somehow?”

Dr. Vaňášek reconsidered. “It’s a difficult business, young man. I could prescribe you a bromide, but—well, I don’t know. As a doctor, I don’t believe in these supernatural events. It’s probably just something with your nervous system, but—listen, Mr. Knotek, you haven’t by chance done anything, how do I put this, holy?”

“Holy? How?”

“Well, something extraordinary. Some virtuous deed or something.”

“I don’t know anything about that, doctor,” Mr. Knotek swallowed. “Well, I haven’t eaten anything all day.”

“Maybe it will pass after you eat,” the old doctor grumbled. “I will tell the bank you have the flu. Listen, in your place, I would try to blaspheme a little bit.”

“Blaspheme?”

“Yes. Or sin in some way. It can’t hurt you, and it’s worth trying. Maybe it will go away of its own accord. Well, I’ll have a look at you in the morning.”

Mr. Knotek stayed by himself and tried to blaspheme, standing before the mirror. Perhaps he didn’t have much of an aptitude for blasphemy or something; the luminous ring about his head did not even waver. Nothing blasphemous occurred to Mr. Knotek at all, so he stuck his tongue out at himself in the mirror and sat down, defeated. He was hungry, and so exhausted he almost burst into tears. “Nothing can help me any more,” he thought. “And it’s all because I forgave that rat Polický. As though it were my fault: he is a brute of a man, and a careerist as well; something isn’t right with him. It’s well known he has nothing bad to say to the ladies at the bank. Mr. Polický, I would like to know why you always need dictation from that one red-haired secretary. Not that I would think there was anything going on, Mr. Polický; such an old man as you doesn’t need that any more. It might strike someone as serious, though, Mr. Polický, such a young girl: it must be about money. Then another one of the clerks or the director takes a look at the accounts, and the bank heads for scandal. That’s how it goes, Mr. Polický, and how else are we supposed to see it? Someone should tell the proper authorities, so they can warn him. Just ask her where she gets the money for her lipstick and her silk stockings—is that at all appropriate, silk stockings in a bank? Do I wear silk stockings? It’s well known that such a young woman only works for a bank to catch an important man; then they just sit there putting makeup on instead of doing their work.” “They are all the same,” Mr. Knotek thought bitterly. “If I were chief clerk, I would turn that right around.”

Or that Šembera,” Mr. Knotek thought. “He got his job out of nepotism, and he can’t even figure out what two plus two makes. Oh, I’ll help you out, just wait and see! Such a nothing who just had to have children. I myself cannot afford a wife or children; how would I fare on my salary? A bank ought not to take such frivolous people into its employ. And if your wife is ailing, Mr. Šembera—well, it’s easy to see why. She needed help; it would make anyone sick to worry about their husband being sent to jail. No, no, and another thing, I won’t cover for you anymore when you make mistakes; let every

man fend for himself. The bank's not there to help people out. They could ask me: 'Mr. Knotek, do you know what your responsibility is? To watch out for every mistake and not to conceal them. That could spoil your career, Mr. Knotek; mind your own business and keep your nose clean. One who would do otherwise deserves no false compassion. Do chief clerk Policky or the general director have any compassion? Do you understand, Mr. Knotek?'"

Mr. Knotek was reeling in hunger and faintness. "God, if only I could go out!" Full of self-pity, he stood and went to look in the mirror. He saw a morose human face in it, and nothing else around it. There was not even a trace of a glow. Mr. Knotek brought his nose right up to the glass, but he saw nothing; instead of a golden ring, he could only see the gloom and solitude of his disordered room.

Mr. Knotek sighed, greatly relieved. So he could go back to the bank the next day!

LN, 24 April 1938

The Man Who Learned To Fly

Mr. Tomšík walked down the street beneath the Vinohrady hospital. He was on his evening constitutional, for Mr. Tomšík was particular about his health and was such a rabid sportsman that he attended all of the league matches. He walked lightly and quickly in the spring twilight, only coming upon pair of lovers here and there, or someone from Strašnice. I should buy a pedometer, he thought, so I know how many steps I have taken in a day. And suddenly he remembered a dream he had three days before: he was walking down the street, but there was a woman with a child's stroller in his way; he pushed off with his left foot lightly and suddenly rose about three meters in the air, flying over the woman with the stroller and gliding back to the ground. This did not startle him at all in his dream; it struck him as very matter-of-fact and unusually pleasant—it only struck him as slightly odd that no one had ever tried it before. It was so easy: he just had to wave his feet a bit, as though he were on a bicycle, and he again rose upwards, gliding to a second-story height and lightly regaining the ground. It sufficed to push off and fly again as effortlessly as twirling streamers around a maypole; he didn't even have to land again, just move his legs like so and fly on. Mr. Tomšík had laughed out loud in his dream that no one had gotten the knack of this yet. "It is easier and more natural than walking after all," Mr. Tomšík realized in his dream, "I must try it tomorrow when I am awake."

That dream had been three days before, Mr. Tomšík remembered. What a pleasant dream it was; it was so easy—well, it would be wonderful, if one could fly like that, just by pushing off with the foot a bit. Mr. Tomšík looked around. No one was walking behind him. Just for fun, Mr. Tomšík started running a bit and pushed off with his left foot, as if he were jumping over a muddy puddle. Right then he rose about three meters in the air and flew, flew in an even arc in the air. This did not surprise him at all; it was really quite natural, a little thrilling, like a ride on a carousel. Mr. Tomšík almost shouted in boyish delight, but he was already nearing the ground thirty meters down the road, and he noticed it was muddy there. He waved his legs as he had in his dream, and immediately

rose higher, landing lightly and without injury some fifteen meters on, right behind the man who was walking melancholically towards Strašnice. The man looked back suspiciously; clearly he did not enjoy having someone right behind him whose footsteps he had not heard. Mr. Tomšík went by him as innocently as possible; he was afraid he might push off with too energetic a step and begin to fly once more.

“I have to test this out systematically,” Mr. Tomšík said to himself, and started returning home the same way he had come, but he only met the same lovers and a railwayman. He crossed the street into an empty lot where they used to store ballast; it was already dark, but Mr. Tomšík feared he might not remember how the next day. He pushed off more firmly this time, but he only flew a little over a meter high and had somewhat of a hard landing.

He tried it again, helping out with his arms, as though he were swimming; now he flew a good eighteen meters high, in a neat semi-circle, and landed as neatly as a dragonfly. He was about to try it a third time, but a ray of light fell on him and a hard voice asked: “What’s all this, then?” It was a police officer on patrol.

Mr. Tomšík started terribly and stammered that he was in training. “Look, move along and train somewhere else,” the patrolman snapped, “but not here.” Mr. Tomšík didn’t understand why he could train somewhere else but not there, but he was an obedient man and so wished the patrolman good night and left immediately, full of fear that he would take off again. That might have been suspicious to the police.

Scarcely had he reached the National Institute for Health than he again jumped into the air, lightly clearing a wire fence and, with the aid of his hands, he flew over the institutional yard right to the other side, to Korunní Avenue, where he landed right in front of a waitress carrying a mug of beer. She cried out and took flight. Mr. Tomšík guessed that flight at two hundred meters; it struck him as an excellent start.

He trained diligently in the next few days, only at night in out-of-the-way places, of

course, especially in the vicinity of the Jewish cemetery over in Olšany. He tried various methods, starting from a sprint or with a dead jump from one spot, for example, or playfully, just waving his legs. He attained heights above a hundred meters, but could get no higher. He developed further landing techniques; from a gliding touchdown to a slow vertical landing, which relied on the work of the arms; he also learned to control his speed and change direction in the air, to fly against the wind, to fly with cargo, to rise or fall according to necessity and similar things. It was simple and easy; Mr. Tomšík was all the more astounded that people hadn't discovered this yet; perhaps it was as simple as the fact that no one before him had simply tried to push off with one foot and fly. Once he remained in the air for the duration of seventeen minutes, but then he got caught in some telephone wires and landed, much to his relief. One night he tried to fly on Ruská Avenue; he was flying maybe four meters up when he spotted two patrolmen underneath him; he turned at once into the yard of a villa while the shocked whistles of the police sounded behind him. He returned on foot a little while later and saw six patrolmen searching the yard with electric torches, supposedly for a thief who had scaled the fence.

Then Mr. Tomšík realized that flying offered him unprecedented possibilities, but nothing decent occurred to him. One night he caught sight of an open window on the fourth floor on Jiří z Lobkovic Square; Mr. Tomšík rose up with a sharp takeoff, sat down on the windowsill, at a loss how to proceed. He heard someone in a firm and deep sleep, so he clambered into the room. Since he had no intention of stealing, he stood there with the same awkward and embarrassed feeling you get in anyone else's apartment. Mr. Tomšík sighed and climbed back out the window, but to leave some trace of his presence and proof of his athletic feat, he took a piece of paper out of his pocket and wrote on it with a pencil: "I was here! The Avenging X." He put the paper on the sleeper's nightstand and quietly descended from the fourth floor. Once he got home he found that the paper had been an envelope addressed to him, but he didn't have the courage to return for it. He was terribly afraid for several days that the police would come investigate, but surprisingly nothing came of it.

After some time Mr. Tomšík felt that he should not have to practice his flying as a secret

and private entertainment; but he did not know how to reveal his discovery to the public. It was just so easy; push off with the foot and assist with the arms, and anyone could fly like a bird. Maybe it would become a new sport; or certainly it could ease the congestion of the streets if one could walk through the air. And there wouldn't be any need for elevators. It would have quite a large impact; Mr. Tomšík did not know exactly of what sort, but it would clearly take off on its own. Every great discovery starts off as a simple game.

Mr. Tomšík had a neighbor at home, a chubby young man named Vojta, and he did something for the newspapers. Yes, he was editor of the sports edition or something. So Mr. Tomšík visited that Mr. Vojta one day, and after much ado finally managed to say he had something interesting to show him. He was so painfully secret about it, that Mr. Vojta thought "My God," or something like that. Nevertheless he recovered himself, started talking and went with Mr. Tomšík to the Jewish cemetery at about nine o'clock in the evening.

"So have a look, Mr. Vojta," Mr. Tomšík said; he pushed off with his foot and rose to a height of five meters. He went through his routine there, landing, taking off again waving his arms, and even stood motionless in mid-air for a good eight seconds. Mr. Vojta got terribly serious and started looking to see Mr. Tomšík was doing it. Mr. Tomšík showed it to him painstakingly: just push off with the foot, and there you are; no, there was nothing spiritual in it, no, no higher power was necessary to do it, or strength of will, or muscular exertion; one just jumped up and flew. "Just try it yourself," he suggested, but Mr. Vojta shook his head. 'There must be some special trick to it, he thought distractedly. But I'll find it.' And Mr. Tomšík was not to show anyone else in the meanwhile.

Later he made Mr. Tomšík fly in front of him with a five-kilogram brick in his hands; it wasn't as easy, and he only got three meters in the air, but Mr. Vojta was satisfied. After the third flight Mr. Vojta said: "Listen, Mr. Tomšík, I don't want to scare you, but this is very serious business. Flying like this under your own power could have a great impact.

Defending the state, for example, do you understand? It must be dealt with scientifically. You know, Mr. Tomšík, you will have to entrust this to the experts. I will arrange it."

And so it happened that Mr. Tomšík stood in boxer shorts before a panel of four men in the courtyard of the National Institute for Physical Education. He was terribly ashamed of his nakedness, had stage fright and shook with cold, but Mr. Vojta had demanded it be so: they couldn't have seen how it was done were he not in the boxer shorts. One of the men, big and bald, was himself the university professor of physical education; he looked quite contemptuous; one could see from the way he held his nose that he considered the whole thing nonsense from a scientific standpoint. He looked impatiently at his watch and grumbled.

"So, Mr. Tomšík," Mr. Vojta said excitedly, "show us the running start first."

Mr. Tomšík, startled, ran two steps.

"Wait," the expert interrupted him. "Your starting position is terrible. You have to put all your weight on your left foot, do you understand? Once again!"

Mr. Tomšík returned and started to put his weight onto his left foot.

"And your arms, sir," the expert instructed him. "You don't know what to do with your arms. You must hold them like this to keep your chest loose. And you were holding your breath as you started running last time. Once again!"

Mr. Tomšík was confused: he really didn't know what to do with his hands and how to breathe; he began uncertainly, checking to see where his weight was centered.

"Now!" cried Mr. Vojta.

Mr. Tomšík goggled and ran: he was just about to take off when the expert said: “Poorly done! Once again!”

Mr. Tomšík tried to stop, but he couldn’t; he weekly pushed off with his left foot and flew maybe a meter in the air; but since he wanted to comply, he aborted his flight and stayed put on the ground.

“Just awful,” the expert shouted. “You have to bend! You have to get on the balls of your feet and bend at the knees! And you have to have your arms forward, do you understand? Your arms transfer momentum, sir; it is a natural movement. Wait,” the expert said, “I will show you. Watch carefully how I do it.” Therewith he took off his coat and got into starting position. “Notice, sir: my weight is on my left foot; nose straight, body inclined forward; I hold my elbows back to expand my chest. Do it like me!”

Mr. Tomšík did it like him; never in his life had he felt so uncomfortably contorted.

“You have to try it,” the expert ordered. “And look at me now! I stick my left leg out first—” the expert did so, ran six steps, pushed off, jumped, describing a beautiful arc with his arms; whereupon he landed elegantly, knees bent, arms forward. “That’s how it is done,” he said, tugging at his pants. “Do it just like I did.”

Mr. Tomšík, dubious and unhappy, looked at Mr. Vojta. Did it have to be this way?

“Once more,” said Mr. Vojta, and Mr. Tomšík contorted himself as he had been instructed. “Now!”

Mr. Tomšík got his legs mixed up; he ran left foot forward. ‘It doesn’t matter; if I just bend my knees like this and hold my arms in,’ he thought carefully as he ran. He almost forgot to jump; he quickly took off—’got to keep my knees bent’, he thought. He leapt a

half meter high and landed a meter and a half away. He at once bent his knees and held his arms forward.

“But Mr. Tomšík,” cried Mr. Vojta, “you didn’t fly! Once more, please!”

Mr. Tomšík began running once more. He only jumped a meter forty, but fell to his knees and threw his arms up. He was soaked in sweat and could feel his heart in his throat. ‘God, just let them leave me alone,’ he thought in defeat.

He tried twice more that day; then they left him alone.

*

From that day on Mr. Tomšík could no longer fly.

LN 1 May 1938

On the Flooding of the World

I don't know if you remember the last world flood. Probably not, since people quite readily forget deserved punishments; but it does not matter, I shall remind you. It was probably as simple as the Lord getting angry at human dissipation, partisanship and other sins, and deciding He would not suffer it to happen any longer. So He sent a rain which lasted forty days and forty nights; the national meteorological institute claimed, however, that it was an influx of moist air from the ocean caused by an extensive low front over the continent. When the Vltava reached the Museum, people started to say that it was not a natural occurrence and that it had to be the end of the world. And so it was. Some people sought protection in churches, others made a run on the banks, withdrawing their money at once (what good that would do them when the world ended God only knows) and others lived it up, spending above their means like they had before; hundreds of them drowned in bars all the same. More reasonable people said that of course something should be done about this world flood, like building levees, and industriously and willingly announced their intentions; but the plans for the levees remained in the planning office and haven't been approved to this day. Finally people set to work themselves and started to build levees where it occurred to them to do so, but what good were levees when the water had already drowned Barrandov, Pankrác, Bohdalec and Střešovice and continued to rise? In other cities in other states with different geographies it wasn't any better; it was still the end of the world, as it had been written. And no one could even construct an ark, for obvious reasons. Podskálí flooded first, and the people in Vinohrady and Dejvice didn't even know how to build a raft, let alone an ark. There was nothing to be done. The end of the world is the end of the world.

In these times there lived an elderly man, named Kirchner or Bezdíček or something like that; and as a retiree he took up archeology, and was always looking for prehistoric relics. Once he was digging somewhere near Hloubětín and found some potsherds, covered with some sort of nicks or scratches; there were perhaps about twenty of them. Then this Mr. Kirchner (or Bezdíček) got it into his head that these symbols were ancient runes, and he would decipher them. The word "Samo" appeared during his

decipherment and some other strange words; so he gleefully collected them and composed the book On The Fragments of Samo, in which he demonstrated that these fragments had come from the broken urn of the great ruler Samo, conqueror of the Avars, and that Samo's life was written on it in the long-extinct Celtic language of the ancient Boii. Naturally, learned archeologists reacted to this discovery with laughter and suggested the runes were simply a poorly-executed linear decoration. From that point on Mr. Bezdíček (or Kirchner) bore a lifelong grudge against "learned archeologists" and produced many pamphlets proving that they were ignoramuses and that his fragments were truly the remnants of Samo's urn. He set to the study of the Celtic languages and maintained that the words he had deciphered on those fragments had Celtic roots. But you know, try to convince the educated of something they have not discovered themselves! Simply put, science did not accept Mr. Kirchner (or Mr. Bezdíček's) proofs, and Mr. Bezdíček felt personally insulted by this, continuing his bitter struggle against archeology. Nothing else existed for him except his runic inscriptions and his fight to sweep away our archeology. And just then came the flooding of the world.

Mr. Bezdíček (or Kirchner) lived in Vinohrady close to the reservoir; he did not care that it was pouring buckets outside, because he was sitting at his writing desk and writing a furious polemic against a Professor Ondrejček or whoever the expert on Celtic graves was. He was writing and didn't care about anything else, and when his maid said that the world might be ending, he only grumbled for her to leave him in peace, he didn't have time for such foolishness; what did he care about some end of the world? 'I'll show that Ondrejček,' he said, 'I'll take him apart piece by piece. His graves in Ouholic,' he said, 'are not Celtic at all, but ordinary Germanic barrows; and that idiot would lecture me on the fragments of Samo?' And then he threw the maid out, saying he didn't have time to talk to her, and kept writing.

Then a neighbor ran up to him, saying that all the building's tenants had started to build a levee downhill in Kravín against the elements; and Mr. Kirchner should come too and help build. 'What's this about levees,' Mr. Bezdíček said, 'what concern are they of mine. I'm letting this dullard have it, this psuedo-scientist Ondrejček, such that he'll

never recover. I have to discredit him; it is in the interest of archeology, sir. Such an ignoramus must not be allowed to defile an extinct nation,' Mr. Kirchner (or Bezdíček) cried. 'This flood of yours does not interest me; please do not bother me further with it, sir.' And he sat down and kept writing. At this point the water was halfway up the statue of Svatopluk Czech.

A third person then came to see Mr. Kirchner, his sister from Flora. She was from a sect that had hidden themselves at the home of a mason in Olšany, devoting themselves to prayers, miracles and prophesy. This cousin informed Mr. Bezdíček that the end of the world and the resurrection of the righteous were nigh, as had been written in the book of Revelations; and that he, Mr. Bezdíček, should join them and await it to the chanting of hymns on the triumph of the righteous. 'How righteous you are,' Mr. Bezdíček proclaimed. You pray, sure, but you do not fight against the false science that this Ondrejček is spreading, not at all. And leave me be with this end of the world of yours. Let the world end ten times, so long as I get the best of this Ondrejček and his so-called Celtic graves.' And then he locked the door, so no one could interrupt his work.

Then the waters rose higher until they flooded the whole world; humanity was extinguished; justly was it so done.

When the waters receded and only reached to the Vinohrady square, this Mr. Kichner or Bezdíček appeared on the mud-covered streets. He was dry as a bone, carrying the manuscript of his polemic against Prof. Ondrejček, and terribly angry that he couldn't find a printer to make a run of his brochure.

When people began to multiply again years later, the new people wondered how Mr. Kirchner or Bezdíček had survived the flooding of the world; but whenever they came out and asked him, his eyes got wide in wonder and he said: "What flood? I don't know anything about it. I was busy with that idiot Ondrejček. Imagine, that ignoramus had come out in print against my runic inscriptions!"

Among us it is said that there is nothing unusual about Mr. Bezdíček's survival. We have known for ages that human rage and fanaticism will survive all disasters and floods; not even the end of the world can touch it.

LN, 5 June 1938

Anonymous

“So just imagine,” said Mr. Diviš, “what has happened to me. I’ve been receiving these...anonymous letters for years now. They are from about three or four people, judging from the handwriting, paper, and so on; two type them and two write them by hand; of these one has horribly poor handwriting, rather base-looking, whereas the other writes in calligraphy, with such drawn, painstaking letters — it must be a terrible amount of work. Why these four have chosen me I cannot even tell you; I don’t get involved with politics, but I occasionally write articles in the newspaper concerning the needs and goals of our dairy and cheese plant. When a man becomes an expert in the smallest thing, it no longer suits him alone and he is compelled to rouse the nation with his scrap of knowledge, informing the conscientious public and so on. I never thought that my proposals to improve our cheese plants could injure anyone’s feelings, but one never knows. One of my faithful anonyms seems to be a butcher or a curer fighting for the interests of his profession; after each of my articles he sends a typed letter in which he accuses me of befouling our conscientious society with this cheese of mine, and of undermining our nation’s strength. The second, writing on an old Remington, notifies me outright that I am, as is commonly known, paid millions in royalties for my idiotic articles by certain interests, and that I have already bought three estates with my thirty pieces of silver. Moreover, I only want to bamboozle our people into swilling down my adulterated and typhoid-riddled milk for their blood-soaked money. Of the handwritten ones the base one writes such shameful things about my wife, well, I cannot even say what, but... it is terrible what people are capable of in rancor and venom. Perhaps it is some well-to-do woman who knows us and who dictates these letters to her maid or washerwoman. Finally, the calligraphic one always threateningly addresses me as “Dear Sir!” and categorically demands that I leave everyone be with my milk; the nation supposedly has other concerns and will faithfully deal with those who deliberately divert its attention to material baseness and destroy its idealism. You shall be the first to hang from the lamp-posts, my calligraphic anonym informs me, when our people see through this web of lies and despicable distractions which your associates and your confederates

have woven, and so on. The specifics don't matter much: you see, these anonymous letters go on in the same vein, as though they had been written by some sort of advice columnist or regular correspondent. I just wondered who was writing them; I thought it was some friend of mine who was looking to vent his private feelings like this or to revenge himself against me in some way—I couldn't imagine what for; but likely as not it had to be someone I knew or someone I had some sort of contact with. I despise writing letters: for this reason I think a normal man has to have a very strong reason to put pen to paper and write something.

It went on for years: the strange thing is that in these recent troubled times the letters have markedly increased in number and vehemence. The martial butcher or whoever has gotten increasingly personal, writing 'you bloated pig, the knife for you is already sharpened,' and such things. The one on the Remington has begun to sign as the "Purge League", and advises me to say good-bye to my estates (you know, as far as land goes, I only have a windowbox of geraniums) for the working classes have already passed judgment over parasites like me. The ungrammatical letters about my wife have become recognizably harsher, and my calligraphic anonym now holds me responsible for everything that has happened, and signs off with the words: 'Flee for the borders, you rogue, it is not too late! Signed: *FUROR*.' Of course, there is more in the same energetic style. I think that the excited times increase both people's tendencies towards writing and their need to show it off; I just wondered all the more how a boring businessman like myself could interest someone so passionately. There had to be something horribly personal behind it—maybe I had injured someone or gotten in someone's way—shows how much one knows about one's acquaintances! Still, you know, it is a little troubling when one has to look at everyone extending a hand with a bit of insecurity: my friend, is it you at last?

Once the other day I went to roam the streets a bit in the evening; I had cleared my mind and was only looking to see how people lived their lives, as though I were from some other time. I don't even know what street I was on—a quiet little one, somewhere near Gröbovka. A short man with a cape was limping in front of me. He seemed to have a terrible cold because he kept coughing, spitting, and hunting through his pockets for a handkerchief. During one of his trips into his pocket an envelope fell out, but he didn't

notice it and kept walking. I picked it up and looked at it to see if it was worth chasing after this little man. My address was on it. And it was written in the same beautiful writing of my fourth anonym.

So I pick up my step and shout: "Excuse me, sir, isn't this your letter?"

The man in the cape stopped and looked through his pockets. "Let me see?" he said. "Yeah, it's my letter. A thousand thanks, sir. Reverent thanks."

I tell you, I stood as still as if I had been struck by lightning. You see, I have a memory for faces, but I had never seen this man before in my life. Here was a nobody for you; horribly stained collar, tattered pants, a crooked knot instead of a necktie; well, it was piteous; his Adam's apple bobbed in his neck, he had streaked eyes, a fatty lump on his face, and on top of it all he had a bad leg—

"My reverent thanks, good sir," he said, gravely polite, and doffed his hat in an old-fashioned way. "Greatly obliged." He waved his hat once more and limped solemnly on.

I tell you, I just stood there and stared after him open-mouthed. So that was my Anonymous! Someone whom I had never met and to whom I had never done anything. And this man writes me and even sends his letters by pneumatic post!¹¹ For the love of God, how did I come to this—and how did he? I had been picturing God-knows-what kind of secret enemy and meanwhile—think of the money it was costing the poor man! I wanted to run after him and find out who he was, but somehow I couldn't; I turned my back on his and made my way home. I felt such terrible pity. I had thought it was making him feel better. But at least the fool could have left off the postage! I should have said 'Sir, you can send it to me postage due; it cost you so much writing, and to drop it like that as well—'

In the morning I got the letter by pneumatic post, still smeared from where it had fallen on the wet pavement. There were terrible things in it: throw me up against the wall, string me up in a tree, and I don't know what else. I just feel so bad about it. You see, he is such a wretch, that man; it must eat away at the poor thing, just imagine what sort of sad and strange life it must be..."

LN, 6 November 1938

¹¹ Prague had an extensive pneumatic post system, and one that was still partially in use

Interview

“Interviews,” said the conductor Pilát, shrugging his shoulders. “I wonder if you would believe it, sir. I too have my experiences with interviews, and I tell you simply that when I have to grant one to someone that I would rather not read it later. I would just get angry for nothing. A man should be able to have a chuckle over the things he reads in an interview, but then he sees how carelessly the journalist has distorted it. You notice slapdash work when you see it, don’t you? Sometimes I marvel how this journalist or that one has muddled and twisted everything I told him so cruelly, as if he deliberately wrote things the wrong way around—why I cannot imagine. If I were a politician or a similarly important figure, fine: that’s how it is in politics, and these people have a special interest in putting words into people’s mouths they never said, or inventing whole conversations, that also happens. But me—how to put it—I am a musician, I am nobody, no one has anything against me, especially not here at home, and still not even half of what I really say in an interview ends up in print.

So I’ll tell you so you know how it is. I have to direct a large concert in Liverpool or Paris. When Maestro Pilát is directing, the agency makes a big deal out of it. I haven’t even washed my hands in the hotel room when the desk calls me and says that a man wishes to speak to me. Important business, supposedly. Good God, I say, the newspapers! You know, the newspapers only care about you the first day; the next you are no longer news, and if you want them to mention you again, you have to get run over by an automobile at the least. So, I let the man wait a little while—it seems to suit the whole business; and then ‘yes, please, what can I do for you?’ The man introduces himself, addresses me as ‘Dear Maestro,’ and says such and such a newspaper would like to print a few words about me...

“What, an interview?” I say. “I do not give interviews on principle.”

until the floods of 2002.

“No, no,” the young man defends himself. “Just a few words, a completely unforced conversation...”

I give in, resigned. “Well then, sir, let’s get on with it!”

The young man takes out a pad and licks his pencil. Right away I can tell that he knows nothing about me, that he does not like music, and that he has no conception of what to talk to me about. He looks at me uncertainly for a moment and then starts: “If you would tell me something about yourself, Maestro.”

That normally rubs me the wrong way. “I know nothing of myself,” I tell him. “But we can talk about music, if it is all the same to you.”

The young man gratefully nods his head, and scribbles furiously. “When did you start to play?” he then asks.

“As a young boy,” I say. “On the piano.”

The young man writes furiously. “Where were you born?”

“In Maršov.”

“Where is that?”

“In Czechoslovakia.”

“Where, please?”

“In Czechoslovakia. In the Krokonoše.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Krkonoše. Riesengebirge,” I explain to him. “Monts Géants. *Giant Mountains.*¹²

“Aha,” the young man says, writing intently. “Can you tell me something about your childhood? For example...what was your father like?”

“He was a teacher. He played the organ in church. Those were my first musical impressions,” I say, to get the subject back to music. “You know, an old Czech cantor like that, a musician, at one with nature—in our country it is a family tradition.” And so on. The young man writes and nods his head, satisfied. That is exactly what his paper needs. Bravo, Maestro!

Finally I show him out and sigh: there, that is over with. I like wandering around foreign cities; no one knows you there... I tell you, sometimes when I am conducting I feel like throwing up my baton when I am struck by the horror and revulsion of people watching me. No one who has no sense for comedy should ever get up in public. But that is another story.

So the next morning I get the newspaper. The headline is bold: “A Conversation with Maestro Pilát.” Fine. “Maestro Pilát admitted our correspondent in a luxury suite in the Hotel X.” Hold on, I met the young man in the hotel lobby! “We were accepted with an unusual, ebullient warmth.” Oh my, I think. “The exquisite, refined surroundings contrasted sharply with the gigantic, severe figure with the enormous mane of hair, unfettered in appearance.” I barely measure a meter-seventy, and as for the mane—well, let’s leave it at that. “He ran his fingers through his graying mane and his swarthy face became gloomy. ‘My origins,’ he said, ‘are concealed in secrecy; I cannot say much about myself. I was born in Hungary not far from Warsaw; the wild and enormous mountains were my womb. Wind roared over the forests at the place of my birth and the

¹² The last is in English in the original.

waterfalls thundered like an organ in a cathedral. That was the first musical impression of my life. I can betray to you that my father was an old gypsy. He lived with nature like hundreds and hundreds of our ancestors. Our family traditions are poaching, freedom, and furious cymbal and violin music. To this day I enjoy disappearing into the camps of my countrymen and playing the violin songs of my childhood around the fire...”

What can I tell you: I ran down to that newspaper and looked for the chief editor. I think I pounded on his desk a bit or something, but that man just took off his glasses and said in surprise: “But sir, we write for the news, after all! We must print the truth interestingly, don’t you understand? I don’t understand why you’re getting so angry...”

Now I’m not mad about it any more, a man gets used to it... And not only that, but I think there might not be any other way about it: you live your life, but the picture other people have of you is always different; what then when this picture is presented to the public! I can’t even tell you any more if this interview was in Liverpool or Rotterdam or somewhere else, but I am convinced of the following: when I stood in that concert hall at my podium, that the entire audience truly saw me as an enormous unfettered wild man with flowing hair, who leapt over gypsy fires, violin in hand. The concert was an enormous and fantastic success. So I don’t even know if the young journalist was so wrong, in a way... you see, at least in that there is private truth and public truth.”

LN, 13 November 1938

Ten Centavos

Of course this wasn't in our country, no papers write like that here, and the voice of society, of the people, of the streets, or however you call it, doesn't turn a corner so quickly at home. It was in Lisbon during one of their political coups; one regime fell, the government embraced another—you know how it is in those foreign countries. Senhor Manoel Varga didn't concern himself too much with it, for politics was not his field; he was just faintly disappointed and sighed sometimes over the disquiet that agitated people's thoughts and turned them from matters (in his mind) that were more useful and noble. For Don Manoel loved peace and his work; he was chair of the Society for Public Education and adamantly believed that higher education opened the gates of the nation to well-being and freedom, that work and learning were our salvation, and so on. That morning, he had just finished attending to some correspondence on the popular astronomy course in Monsaras and a lecture on the health of nursing infants in the town of Moura, when his housekeeper came back from shopping, her eyes streaming and face red.

"Here you have it, sir," she proclaimed, and tossed a crumpled newspaper onto the table. "And I am quitting this place! I am an honorable woman, and I cannot work in such a place!"

"Come now, come now," Mr. Varga said in surprise, and looked over his glasses at the newspaper. He froze for a moment; the following headline appeared in bold on the front page: "HANDS OFF, SENHOR MANOEL VARGA!!!" Senhor Varga couldn't believe his eyes. "Where did you get this, woman?" he sputtered.

From the butcher, supposedly. The butcher had showed it to her, and everyone was talking about it. And everybody was saying something had to be done and such a wretched traitor and dog like Don Varga couldn't be allowed to live on their street.

“What everybody?” Mr. Varga asked comprehendingly.

Everybody; the maids, the servants, the butcher, the baker—“And I can’t stay,” she managed through furious tears. “People will come here with torches—and they have every right to! It’s right there in the papers, who’s doing what and why...that’s what someone gets for their faithful service!”

“Please, leave me be,” said Don Varga. “And if you want to go, I won’t stop you.”

Now he could read what the newspaper said. “Hands off, Senhor Manoel Varga!” Perhaps it was another Varga, he thought a moment in relief, and read on. No, it was about him. “The public has been taking account of your ‘humanitarian’ actions, Mr. Varga, and you have poisoned the soul of our nation for years and years! We will not stand for your rotten, outlandish education, which only aggravates our moral decay, weakens us and divides us; moreover, we will not allow you to spread your subversive opinions among our youth and our simple people under the name of useful education any longer...”

Mr. Manoel Varga set the newspaper down in sorrow. He could not grasp what was subversive in popular astronomy or the hygiene of nurselings, and he didn’t even try. He simply believed in education, and liked people, and that was all. So many people came to his lectures, and now they wrote that people thought them worthless and abhorred them. Mr. Varga shook his head and read on. “If our officials will not intervene with your little arrangement, then our roused public will have to take matters into its own hands. Until then, be on guard, Mr. Manoel Varga!”

Senhor Manoel Varga carefully folded the newspaper and put it down. So this is the end, he told himself. He could not understand what had changed so abruptly in people that what had been good yesterday was harmful and subversive today; but he understood even less how so much hatred had sprung up between men. God in heaven, there was so much hatred! Old Don Manoel shook his head and looked out at the suburb

of São João. It was lovely and dear as always; you could hear the happy cries of children and barking dogs—Mr. Varga took his glasses off and slowly cleaned them. God, so much hatred! What has happened to everyone! It was as if they had changed overnight. Even the housekeeper; she had been there for so many years...Mr. Varga remembered wistfully that he was a widow. If my poor late wife were alive—would she have changed too?

Senhor Manoel Varga sighed and picked up the telephone. “I’ll call my old friend de Souza”, he told himself, “he’ll advise me—”

“Hello, this is Varga.”

A moment of silence. “Souza. What do you want?”

Mr. Varga gulped. “I just wanted...to ask. Have you read the article?”

“I have.”

“Please...what should I do about it?”

A slight hesitation. “Nothing. You must realize, that... that circumstances have changed. See? Well. Get used to it.” Click. Mr. Varga couldn’t even find the cradle for the telephone. That was his best friend. How could everything have changed so? Get used to it—but how? How could a man get used to being hated? And how could a man get used to hate when he had preached love his whole life?

Well, I must get used to it—at least formally, Don Manoel decided; so he sat down at his desk and carefully drafted a letter, stating he was resigning his post of chair of the Society for Public Education. In light of such changed circumstances, and so on. Mr. Varga sighed and took his hat; he would deliver it himself, to have it done with all the

sooner.

He went across town on back streets with the feeling that even the buildings were looking at him differently, almost inimically, perhaps also in the light of the changed circumstances. Perhaps the neighbors were talking about that Varga who poisons our very nation. Someone might have been slowly closing their door as he went by—it wouldn't be surprising. Mr. Varga walked quickly, in light of such changed circumstances. "I might have to move somewhere else, he thought, sell my summer camp and...well, get used to it, right?"

Mr. Varga got onto a tram and sat in a corner. Two or three people were just then reading that very paper. Hands off, Senhor Manoel Varga! What if they knew it was me, Don Manoel thought—that gloomy-looking one might point and say: 'Do you see him! It is that Varga who spreads his subversive ideas! And he is not ashamed to be out in public!' I should get off the tram, Mr. Varga thought, feeling unfriendly eyes about him...Christ in heaven, how well people's eyes could show hate!

"Ticket, sir," the conductor's voice boomed over him. Mr. Varga almost jumped, and started to take a handful of change out of his pocket; at this a small ten-centavo coin fell and rolled under a seat.

The conductor looked for it. "Leave it," Mr. Varga said at once, counting change—he didn't want to call attention to himself.

The gloomy-looking man set down his paper and bent over, peering under the seat for the coin. "Honestly, sir, it isn't worth it," Mr. Varga assured him, quite nervously.

The man grumbled something and crawled under the bench after the coin; the others in the tram watched him with interest and understanding.

“I think it fell here,” a second man mumbled, sitting on his heels to look for it. Mr. Varga was on tenterhooks.

“Thank you...thank you,” he stammered, “but it’s really not necessary—”

“There it is,” the second man proclaimed, his head underneath the bench, “but it fell between the boards, the little devil! Do you have a knife?”

“I don’t,” Mr. Varga apologized, “but please...it’s not worth the effort—”

A third senhor put down his paper and dug in his pockets without a word; he took out a leather case and from it a little silver knife. “Show me,” he told the second man, “I will get it out.”

The whole tram looked on intently, delighting in the sight of the third man probe the gap between the boards with his blade. “It’s coming along,” he rumbled contentedly, and at that the coin jumped out and rolled merrily along. A fourth man bent over, hunting under a bench.

“Here it is,” he announced triumphantly, and stood up, red with exertion. “There you are, sir,” he wheezed, and handed the coin to Mr. Varga.

“Thank...thank you, sir,” Senhor Manoel Varga babbled, touched. “You were very kind, and the other gentlemen as well,” he added, bowing politely in all directions.

“It was nothing,” the third man grumbled.

“Glad to do it,” spoke the second.

“At least you found it,” said the first.

The people on the tram smiled and nodded their heads. At least the coin was found—hooray! Manoel Varga, blushing in embarrassment over attracting so much attention, sat rigidly, watching the third man, the one with the knife, pick up his newspaper once more and begin to read the article: “Hands off, Senhor Varga!”

When Mr. Varga got off, everyone in the tram nodded at him in a friendly way; even the ones reading the newspaper raised their eyes and grumbled: “Adios, senhor!”

LN, 20 November 1938

Editorial Remarks

It was Karel Čapek's wish that these "fables and understories", the majority of which came from his later years in journalism, be assembled into a book. He left behind preparatory materials for this volume, consisting of a collection of newspaper clippings and several manuscripts found in his estate. It was possible to fill in the incomplete material from the original clippings until it encompassed the entirety of the intended contents. The author's original goal was not only fulfilled by assembling all of the understories, (the name that Čapek himself gave to his feuilletons), but also to include all the fables we have of Čapek's from 1925 and 1938 in their various incarnations .

In addition to the newspaper fables, two collections were included directly from manuscripts. The first of these was found on the back of a letter from the poet Jaroslav Seifert, in which he had requested a contribution from Čapek for the *May Gazette 1935*, subsequently published by the Central Workers' Bookstore and Ant. Svěcený Publishing in Prague. Twelve of the twenty-one fables in it were published in the thirteenth section of the cycle of fables with the notation that the manuscript was from 1935. One of them (Stone) was published by the author a privately in a collection of Fables, printed in fifty copies in 1936 for Václav Palivec. The second group of fables (XIV) comes from a handwritten octavo manuscript page included by the author in the preliminary material for this book. It has no date, but in all likelihood an origin of 1936 is indicated by its similarity to other extant manuscripts published in that year.

Though the publishers have largely preserved the original chronological progression of the understories, they had to judge between several different possible arrangements for the fables, keeping in mind the exacting sensibilities of the reader. The most attractive of these systems comes from Karel Čapek himself, who, in the aforementioned private edition of 1936, divided his fables into thematic categories whose headings were literature, politics, history, war, and the future. But this possibility, even in light of his arrangement, eventually gave way to the decision to leave the fables in

their original groupings according to their original printing. In this manner they illustrate their timely and extensive effect best of all, their connection to the atmosphere of the times and the events which gave birth to them, quickly transforming into ironic commentary, cutting remarks, aggressive appeals, and sharp commentary on day-to-day events.

In this reprint several minor corrections have been made which the author added to newspaper clippings after their publication, as well as some stylistic corrections originally made by the author during assembly of his 1936 collection. Variant versions exist of the original texts, but we have captured their definitive form in this book.

Prague, 1946